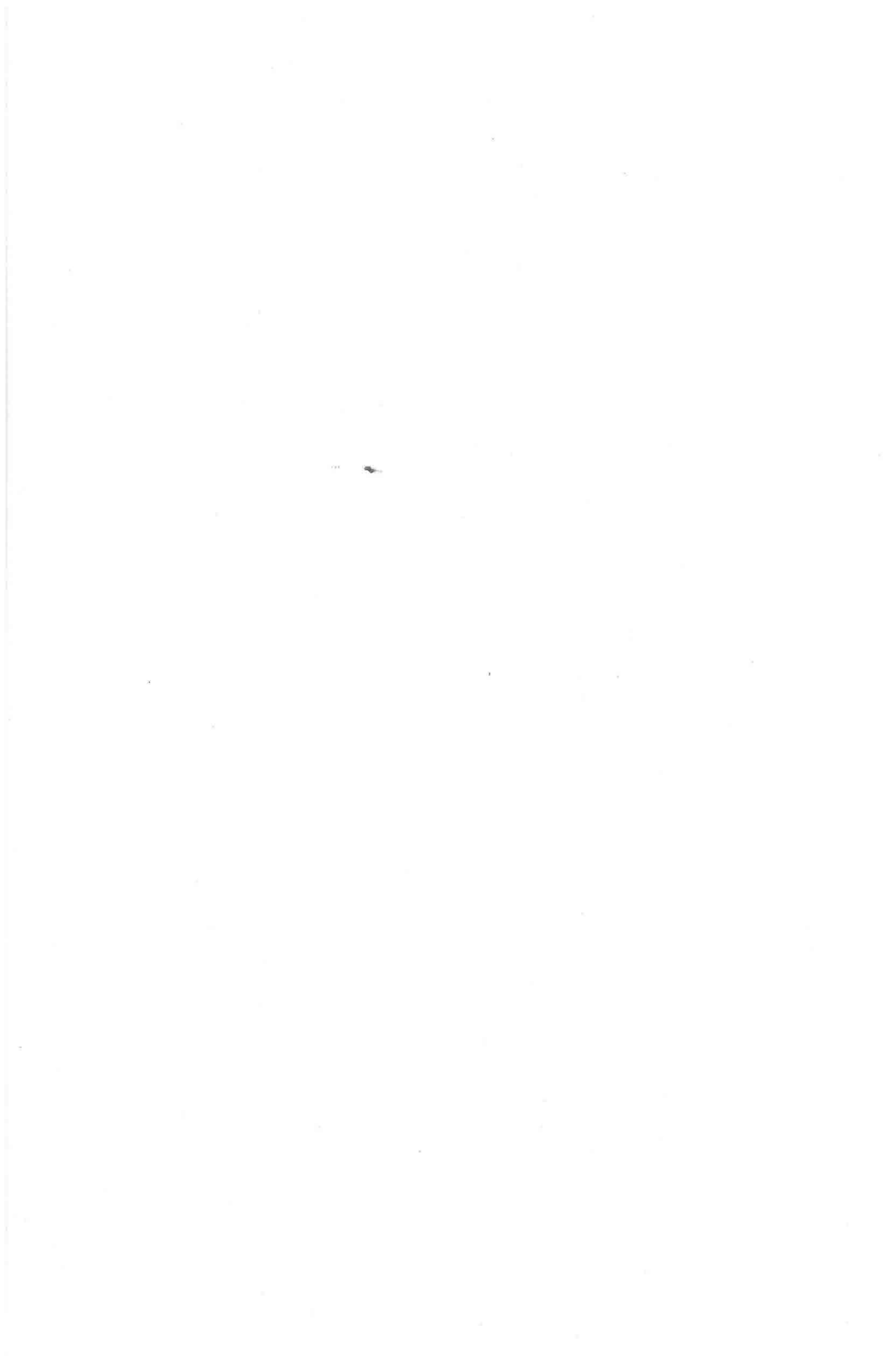


DAVID EWERT

Finding Our Way

Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies

Winnipeg, Manitoba



FINDING OUR WAY

Confronting Issues in the Mennonite
Brethren Church

By

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FINDING OUR WAY

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To my mother, Margareta Ewert, who
at 99 still prays for and contributes to
the Mennonite Brethren Church.

FOREWORD

Some sixty years ago I stood with fear and trembling before a large Mennonite Brethren congregation, in Coaldale, Alberta, to confess my faith in Christ and to be baptized into the Body of Christ. As an insecure teenager and a babe in Christ I had decided to cast my lot with the Mennonite Brethren Church for better or for worse. I was aware of the fact that there were many other churches besides the Mennonite Brethren who also tried to be faithful to Jesus and his teachings, and I had observed the members of the Coaldale congregation long enough to know that I was not joining a perfect church. In fact I was keenly aware of my own imperfections and wondered whether the congregation would accept me as a member. To my great joy and satisfaction I was accepted as a candidate for baptism and church membership.

For six decades now I have tried to be loyal to my denomination and to make a contribution to its growth and spiritual welfare. There are some aspects of the Mennonite Brethren Church that I do not particularly appreciate, but I owe my denomination an enormous debt. It nurtured my spiritual life; it called me to serve its young people in our schools; it commissioned me to be a minister of the gospel. I shall always be grateful for the grace of God that came to me through the many local Mennonite Brethren churches to which we have belonged over the years.

It has also been my privilege to serve the people of God in other denominations both at home and abroad, but the Mennonite Brethren Church has always remained my spiritual home, as it were. Besides teaching in a number of Mennonite Brethren schools, it has been my privilege to serve on denominational boards, and to participate in study conferences, conventions and commissions. Also I was asked repeatedly to give lectures, write articles and study-papers on a great variety of issues which the church faced in the last half century. It was always my concern that doctrinal and ethical questions, that came to the surface from time to time, be looked at in the light of the Scriptures. The following chapters illustrate this effort to think biblically about issues with which our churches have

had to deal with in the past decades.

In this volume I have brought together a number of these study-papers to illustrate how we have wrestled with theological and ethical concerns in the past. They represent a kind of history of Mennonite Brethren thought from the middle to the end of the twentieth century. The papers that appear in this volume were written in response to requests by denominational leaders and boards and most of them were discussed at conventions and open forums.

Beginning in the early fifties and ending in the late nineties, an attempt has been made to arrange the papers in this volume in chronological order. At the end of each paper I have indicated the occasion and the year in which each paper was read. As one can imagine, the responses to these papers (both criticism and affirmation) varied considerably. In retrospect I find it a bit amusing, that what was considered by some to be avant-garde, even radical, several decades ago, is thought to be antiquarian by now. Whether that's a sign of spiritual growth or of retrogression, is not for me to say at this time.

If I had to prepare papers on the following topics today, I would probably say many things quite differently from the way they appear in this volume, but I have deliberately left them substantially unchanged. In a few cases the paper was abbreviated and slightly revised. A selection of topics had to be made, and so what follows is only representative of the many issues with which the Mennonite Brethren Church has grappled over the years.

I am grateful to Dr. Abe Dueck, a former colleague in the teaching ministry and now director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, for assistance in publishing these papers.

David Ewert

Preservation of the Believer

Earlier theologians styled that aspect of salvation which dealt with the preservation of the believer as "the perseverance of the saints." Popularly it is also known as the doctrine of eternal security--a teaching that is widely held today, but that does not sit well with Mennonites.

We begin by letting proponents of this view define eternal security for us. "The Scriptures declare that, in virtue of the original purpose and continuous operation of God, all who are united to Christ by faith will infallibly continue in a state of grace and will finally attain to eternal life" (A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 881). "They who have been regenerated and effectually called by God to a state of grace, can never fall from that state and thus fail to attain to eternal salvation, though they may sometimes be overcome by evil and fall into sin" (L. Berkoff, *Systematic Theology*, p. 547). This doctrine "is more distinguished by the fact that it is set forth in the New Testament in the most absolute terms and is there seen to be an indivisible feature of that which God undertakes when a soul is saved" (L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 111,267). And the Westminster Confession declares: "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (17.1).

Critics of eternal security are often accused of holding that salvation is by works, by means of human effort, and not by grace. They are said to belittle the finished work of Christ. However, opponents of eternal security do not accept such charges. They too believe firmly in the keeping power of God's grace, but they also take seriously the warnings of Scripture against turning away from

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Christ.

In this paper we want to see what the Scriptures have to say on both sides of this issue. To help us understand the tension between those who hold to eternal security and those who do not, we must begin by giving some historical background to this controversy. Following that, we shall try to spell out some of the basic tenets of the opposing theological systems through which the Bible is often read. Finally we want to look at the biblical data and see whether we cannot find a way by which both the warnings and the promises of the Bible are brought together in a meaningful way. In biblical hermeneutics it is often just as important to keep truths that appear to be in contradiction in balance, than to discover new truths.

I. The Historical Background for Divergent Views on this Subject

A. The Patristic Period

The pre-Augustinian writers seem to represent the Christian life somewhat dualistically. Sometimes salvation appears to be dependent on free choice, and then again it seems to be contingent on the free grace of God. This is reflected, for example, in the writings of Justin, as well as those of the Alexandrian Fathers, such as Clement and Origen. In the case of the Greek Fathers generally, writes Berkoff, "the main emphasis was on the free will of man, rather than on the operation of divine grace" (L. Berkoff, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 63). In the West, by contrast, human responsibility is reduced to a minimum, although in the writings of Tertullian, for example, the synergistic theory of regeneration is still reflected. In general, pre-Augustinian writers see a co-working of human freedom and divine grace in the experience of salvation.

With Augustine a clear monergism comes to light. His view of the total depravity of human beings and divine sovereignty, influenced no doubt by his own dramatic experience of conversion, pushes the element of human responsibility to the periphery.

Salvation is entirely of grace from beginning to end. Those who were chosen by God unconditionally for eternal life will be saved. If someone who had confessed faith in Christ fell away, it was a sign that he or she did not belong to the elect. Final perseverance, by contrast, was a clear indication that a person had been chosen by God's grace to inherit eternal life.

Augustine stood in conflict with Pelagius, who stressed the free and undetermined will of human beings and took issue with Augustine's view of "irresistible grace."

Although Augustine's system of theology became dominant in the West, it was modified from time to time. Eventually the doctrine of irresistible grace was supplanted by the sacramental grace of baptism. Throughout the Middle Ages voices in favor of the Augustinian view of predestination could be heard, while at the same time the notion that people could co-operate with God in the experience of salvation was not unheard of. Some held that God's grace was sovereign in enabling people to turn to Christ in faith, but from then on it was expected that they would co-operate with God's grace. With so much emphasis by the Medieval Church on good works or external acts, the monergism as taught by Augustine became somewhat blurred.

B. The Era of the Reformation

Luther, Zwingli and Calvin all taught the total depravity of human beings and their absolute dependence on God's grace for spiritual renewal. Although Luther was not as outspoken as Calvin, both Reformers were predestinarians. In Calvin, however, election becomes more prominent, whereas in Luther it recedes into the background. Faith and justification are more central in Luther than election, as in Calvin. Moreover, the notion that God had determined in eternity who would be lost, was foreign to Luther. Calvin, like Augustine, held to the irresistible grace of God; Luther thought God's grace could be resisted; people could frustrate God's gracious operation. Calvin, of course, must not be held responsible for some of the views held by some later Calvinists.

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As time went on, some of those within the Calvinist tradition revolted against some of the extreme forms of Calvinism. Jacob Arminius, when asked to defend supralapsarianism (i.e., that God had decided before the fall who would be saved and who would not), changed his views. This led eventually to the so-called Remonstrance which found formal expression in the Synod of Dort (1618). The Remonstrants were condemned by theologians in the Reformed tradition, but that did not mean the end of their teaching.

The followers of Arminius saw the possibility of a total and final fall from grace on the part of a believer. That did not mean that God's power was inadequate to keep them safe to the end, but it put strong emphasis on human responsibility. Arminius wrote: "My sentiments respecting the perseverance of the Saints are, that those persons who have thus been made partakers of his life-giving Spirit, possess sufficient powers to fight against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh, and to gain the victory over these enemies--yet not without the assistance of the grace of the same Holy Spirit" (James Nichols, *The Works of James Arminius*, I, 254).

The Synod of Dort affirmed double predestination (i.e., of the election of some and the preterition of others), the total depravity of human beings, and the doctrine perseverance. On the latter point the Synod ruled: "God who is rich in mercy according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people even in their grievous falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death or against the Holy Spirit; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction" (L. Berkoff, *Systematic Theology*, p. 545).

The followers of Arminius generally held that those who are justified and regenerated may, by neglecting grace and grieving the Holy Spirit, finally fall into perdition. To put it positively, God bestows universal grace on all human beings, enabling them to believe the gospel, and if they persevere to the end, become partakers of eternal life. They do not deny the doctrine of election, but they see election as based on divine foreknowledge of the

believer's faith, obedience and perseverance, and reprobation as foreseen unbelief, disobedience and persistence in sin.

C. Wesleyan Arminianism

This age-old conflict became a serious issue once again during the revivals of the eighteenth century. John and Charles Wesley represented the Arminian point of view, over against George Whitefield and Augustus Toplady, who were Calvinists and strongly opposed Arminian teachings. The Wesleys found it hard to accept the Calvinist emphasis on the absolute sovereign decrees of God. Like the Calvinists they too reveled in the wondrous grace of God by which humankind was redeemed, and although they also held that human beings were depraved, they stressed the universal availability of the benefits of the atonement to all who turned to God in repentance and faith. Against the humanists, the Wesleys urged the sinfulness of human beings; against the Calvinists the salvability. To follow the Calvinist way of thinking, according to John Wesley, undermined the necessity of preaching. Both salvation and perdition depended on the voluntary response of people to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives (D. W. Niesel, *Das Evangelium und die Kirchen*, p. 250).

John Wesley's Arminian leanings, however, did not mean that he viewed those who thought otherwise as his enemies. There is delightful conversation that the great evangelical leader, Charles Simeon, had with the Arminian John Wesley in the year 1784, which not only demonstrates the civility of these two giants of faith, but also their attempt to be theologically balanced.

"Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions." Permission being readily and kindly granted, Simeon proceeded to ask: "Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would

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never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?" "Yes," says the veteran, "I do indeed." "And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do and look for salvation solely through Christ?" "Yes, solely through Christ." "But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?" (Here is where Calvinists feel they can charge the Arminian with Pelagian synergism.) "No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last." "Allowing then that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?" "No." "What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?" "Yes, altogether." "And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?" "Yes, I have no hope but in Him." "Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we cordially unite in those things wherein we agree" (Quoted by H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon*, p. 79).

The story is told that John Wesley on one occasion was asked whether he expected to see George Whitefield, with whom he disagreed in the matter of eternal security, in heaven. Wesley replied: "No Sir, I fear not, for he will be so near to the eternal throne and we shall be at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him." And Charles Wesley, in one of his hymns, wonders whether he might not have to blush in heaven because he was so suspicious of the Calvinist doctrine of election here on earth. But, he concludes, "It matters not; if all our conflicts past, Before the great

white throne we meet at last" (*The Prairie Overcomer*, March-April, 1959, 82-83).

II. The Basic Tenets of Opposing Theological Systems

A. The "Five Points" of Calvinism

1. Total Depravity. All people are dead in sin, though not equally bad or as bad as they could be. Not that individuals have nothing good in them, but they are enemies of God and are unable to exercise holy volitions or to cleanse themselves of sin.

2. Unconditional Election. By an eternal decree without any merit on the part of human beings, God has separated the human race into two groups, ordaining the one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death. His decision to save "some" is an expression of his sovereign grace.

3. Limited Atonement. If God has determined to save an elect group of people, then Christ's redemption is available for these alone. The atonement is infinite enough to save the whole human race, but it is limited in the sense that God has intended it to be. The atonement is "efficient" to save only the elect.

4. Irresistible Grace. Through the Holy Spirit Christ's redemption becomes effective in that it leads the elect to repentance and faith, and makes them heirs of eternal life. Regeneration is a sovereign act of God, since human beings cannot move towards God of their own will. As the Spirit moves on people, they are "made willing" and so act in free will to accept salvation.

5. Perseverance of Saints. This is implied in the previous premises. Since the Holy Spirit indwells believers, they are potentially holy. Their perseverance is dependent on God's grace, not on good works, since under grace they are not treated according to their merits. Though truly saved, the Christian may temporarily backslide and commit sin, but he or she is never defeated completely, for God by the exercise of his grace on their hearts, infallibly prevents even the weakest saint from final apostasy. An outward profession is not always a clear proof that the person

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concerned is a true Christian. Perseverance then, is the logical outcome of the doctrine of election and irresistible grace.

B. The Arminian Position

1. God by an eternal decree in Jesus Christ, his son, determined to save all those who would believe in Christ and who persevere in faith and obedience, by his grace, to the end. The unbelieving are under God's wrath. Predestination is, then, conditional.

2. Jesus by his death obtained redemption for all people, but only those who put their trust in Christ experience the forgiveness of sins. Atonement is not limited but universal in its availability.

3. Unbelievers must be born again by the Holy Spirit. They are unable to save themselves. Salvation is by grace alone.

4. The grace of God can be thwarted and rejected; it is not irresistible. Human beings are responsible for the way they respond to the offer of salvation through Christ.

5. Those who have true faith in Christ and who have become partakers of his life-giving Spirit, "have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory; it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit; and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptation, extends to them his hand, and only if they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive, keeps them from failing, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled or plucked out of Christ's hands" (H. Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, p. 11, 345).

This Arminian understanding of the Scriptures, say Calvinists, "assumes that the serious intentions of God may in some cases at least be defeated, and that man, who is not only a creature, but a sinful creature, can exercise veto power over the plans of almighty God" (L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p.33). How are we to explain such opposing views of what the Scriptures teach on this important subject?

III. The Biblical Data and Their Interpretation

A. How to Approach the Biblical Data

There are many Bible readers who hold to "eternal security," but know nothing about the teachings of Calvin. Similarly there are those who are Arminian without knowing anything about Arminius and the conflict between Arminians and Calvinists in the history of the church. Although the conflict between these two different readings of Scripture on the question of the preservation of the believer has often led to bitterness and to the disruption of fellowship among fellow-believers, many Christians have come to realize that people in both camps are concerned that they remain true to the Word of God. Then why these opposing views?

What often happens is that one teaching of Scripture is emphasized at the expense of another. The Bible is not a systematic theology and so we must be careful not to squeeze the various emphases of Scripture into a logic tight system. The great truths of redemption often appear as paradoxes, and cannot easily be put onto a common denominator. It is not very helpful to say, as L. S. Chafer does, "It is conceivable hypothetically that both Arminianism and Calvinism are wrong, but it is wholly impossible for both to be right. The Bible offers no contradictions. If one system is right, the other is wrong. There is no compromise possible" (*Systematic Theology*, III, 274).

We should never try to press for a harmony of apparently opposing statements of Scripture simply in order to build up a perfect system of theology. If we do, we are bound to overlook or to suppress some teachings that do not easily fit into our framework. J. F. Strombeck, who attacks the Arminian position rather violently, writes, "If there is an apparent meaning that contradicts these doctrines (i.e. eternal security), then it is necessary to seek some other meaning" (*Shall Never Perish*, p. 189).

Professor Mullins observes correctly, that those who emphasize the "logic" of the plan of salvation, forget that the New Testament writers rarely indulge in such formal logic, and as a rule

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not all the teaching of Scripture is taken into account in such logic. "The Arminians very easily go extreme in exalting human freedom and minimizing divine grace, whereas Calvinism so emphasizes the absoluteness of God... (that) the human response and effort are ignored" (*The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 433).

God meets people in their needs, and as Christians we need warnings when we are in danger of falling away from the living God, but we also need assurances that no one can pluck us out of our Savior's hands. G. Ferris writes: "Scripture refrains from putting the general questions which were afterwards suggested to speculative theology, and from drawing the universal theoretical conclusions which theology formulated . . . the abstract question of the relation of human freedom to unfailing perseverance is neither solved or proposed" ("Perseverance, *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, 111,754).

Charles Simeon, an Anglican preacher and contemporary of John Wesley, made the following balanced comments against the background of the Arminian/Calvinist controversy of his day:

The author is disposed to think that the Scripture system is of broader and more comprehensive character than some very dogmatic theologians are inclined to allow; and that, as wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve one common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other and equally subserve the purpose of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation. The author feels it impossible to avow too distinctly that it is an invariable rule with him to give to every portion of the Word of God its full and proper force, without considering what scheme it favors, or whose system it is likely to advance. Of this he is sure, that there is not a decided Calvinist or Arminian in the world who equally approves of the whole of Scripture . . . who, if he had been in the company of St. Paul while he was writing his

Epistles, would not have recommended him to alter one or other of his expressions" (H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon*, p. 79).

It should be added that our salvation will not be determined by our views regarding the teaching of eternal security (assuming that we trust in Christ for our salvation). Even Chafer, who is most dogmatic in his Calvinism, says of Arminians, "Multitudes who have been trained in these false doctrines are saved, but they are saved in spite of their doctrines, and those who are saved have in every case been kept from the moment they were saved" (L.S. Chafer, *Grace*, p. 57).

We turn now to several passages that emphasize the security of the believer. Following that we must also look at some of the warnings of Scripture.

B. Scripture Passages that Teach the Security of the Believer

Believers may without presumption have the assurance of eternal life in their hearts. Such assurance rests, first of all, on the divine promises which assure us that God will complete the work he has begun in them. Then there is the witness of the Spirit in the hearts of God's children, confirming that they belong to God and are safe in his keeping.

Jesus said, "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

The famous Cambridge New Testament scholar, Wescott, has this to say with reference to this passage:

The doctrine of 'final perseverance' has been found in this passage. But we must carefully distinguish between the certainty of God's promises and his infinite power on the one hand, and the weakness and variableness of man's

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will on the other. If man falls at any stage in his spiritual life, it is not from want of divine grace, nor from the overwhelming power of adversaries, but from his neglect to use that which he may or may not use. We cannot be protected against ourselves in spite of ourselves. He who ceases to hear and to follow is thereby shown to be no true believer, I John 2:19. The difficulty in this case is only one form of the difficulty involved in the relation of an infinite to a finite being. The sense of the divine protection is at any moment sufficient, to inspire confidence but not to render effort unnecessary (B. F. Wescott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 158).

The epistolary literature of the New Testament is full of passages in which believers are assured that they will be kept by the power of God until they pass through the gates of splendor. Paul writes: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38,39). "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Interestingly in the next chapter Paul admonishes his readers: "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:12,13). To Timothy Paul writes: "But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me" (I Tim. 1:12). It is difficult to say whether the word "deposit" refers to Paul's reward, his soul, his salvation, his faith, or his calling to be an apostle, but one fact is evident: whatever is placed within the range of God's protection, will lie safe in his hands.

The apostolic writers of the General Epistles sound the same notes of assurance: "Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). "Who by the power of

God are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:5). "Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing . . ." (Jude 24).

From these clear words of assurance, we turn now to some of the warnings of Scripture.

C. A Brief Study of Some of the Warnings of Scripture

The proponents of eternal security come to terms with the warnings of Scripture against falling away in different ways: 1. The warnings are not directed at true believers. 2. The warnings do not apply to this age. 3. The Scripture's examples of apostates cannot be used as warnings, for we do not know whether they were ever truly born again. 4. The warnings have to do with loss of fellowship, or the loss of future rewards, but not the loss of eternal life.

Let me illustrate this attempt to evade the clear warnings of Scripture. Jesus said, "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:6). L. S. Chafer explains that the "abiding" has to do with "communion" not with "union." The unfruitful branch is taken away, that is, God removes him from this life. "Assurance of heaven does not depend on communion, or fruit bearing, but on union with Christ" (*Systematic Theology* III, 299). He goes on to say, "To read into this passage the idea that God casts them forth and that God burns them is to disregard important language, and to contradict the great truths which belong to salvation by grace alone" (p. 300).

But the British scholar, Henry Alford, writes: "This verse is a most important testimony against supralapsarian error, showing us that falling from grace is possible, and pointing out the steps of the fall" (*The Greek New Testament*, p. 1, 859).

The apostle Paul also warns repeatedly against falling away from the faith. He cautions the Thessalonian believers against living in sin, "for the Lord is an avenger in all these things (I Thess. 4:6). He is exasperated to see the Galatians being led astray: "You who

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want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4). He warns them against the works of the flesh, "for those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:21). These warnings are given to true believers.

The Corinthians, too, are warned that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:10). Paul himself is concerned that he, after preaching to others, should himself be cast away (I Cor. 9:27). He narrates the sad story of Israel's apostasy in I Corinthians 10:1-11, as a warning to Christian believers not to fall into the same trap. Similarly, he points out to his Roman readers, that Israel, the natural branches in the Abrahamic tree, were broken off because of unbelief, and the wild branches, Gentile believers, were grafted in by faith. He then warns them, not to be proud, but to stand in awe (Rom. 11:17-24).

In his Pastoral Epistles Paul mentions people who by rejecting conscience, "have suffered shipwreck in the faith" (I Tim. 1:19,20). He foresees the tragic possibility of people renouncing their faith (I Tim. 4:1), of turning away and following Satan (I Tim. 5:15). The desire for wealth, he points out, has led some believers to wander away from faith. They fall into temptation and harmful desires "that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (I Tim. 6:9).

Perhaps no New Testament writer has spoken so forcefully about the danger of falling away from the faith as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Let us listen to some of his warnings: "Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (2:1). He follows this up with the warning not to neglect "so great a salvation" (2:3). "Take care, brothers, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (3:12). That exhortation is followed by a warning against the hardening of the heart by the deceitfulness of sin (3:13). Like Paul, the writer repeatedly holds up the apostasy of ancient Israel as warning not to fall into the same trap (3:7-18).

The strongest statements concerning apostasy are found in Hebrews 6 and 10. "For it is impossible to restore again to

repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt" (6:4-6).

The many attempts to circumvent the full import of these warnings for Christian believers need not be listed here. However, a common escape is to argue that the writer is dealing with people who were not true believers. But why would the Epistle to the Hebrews be in the New Testament if it were not meant to be read and applied by Christians. Whether they were Jewish or Gentile believers changes nothing. To say that the writer must be understood as using a hypothetical situation is dishonest.

It we listen carefully to the text we notice (a) that the readers had been illuminated, a term that is used upon occasion for conversion (Heb. 10:32; 2 Cor. 4:6). (b) They had tasted the heavenly gift. To taste means to experience, as 2:9 clearly shows, and cannot be a reference to participation in the Lord's Supper. (c) They became partakers of the Holy Spirit, meaning, that they received the gift of the Spirit. (d) They had tasted the good of the word of God. In other words they had heard and believed the gospel. (e) They had tasted the powers of the age to come. Precisely what is meant by "powers" is not altogether clear, but evidently the readers had been delivered "from the present evil age" (Gal. 1:3), and had entered the age to come.

There is then no question about the genuineness of the faith of the readers of this epistle. In the words of Hammond: "We cannot escape the force of the words by suggesting that the persons in view have had only a very superficial acquaintance with the things of God" (T. C. Hammond, *The New Creation*, p. 59). And these true followers of Jesus are warned not to fall away. Our passage gives no indication that the apostle is warning Jewish Christians against returning to the Jewish temple and the sacrifices brought there. And the falling away which the author has in mind should not be understood simply as lukewarmness in the life of a believer. Nor is

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he thinking of falling into sin, for all believers catch themselves doing that from time to time. Nor should we read the text simply as a warning against “backsliding,” in the sense that believers sometimes go through periods of spiritual indifference. Rather, he is thinking of a process of hardening, that leads eventually to a total rejection of Christ. Such people are compared to the field that produces thorns and thistles; it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned” (Heb. 6:8).

Hebrews 10:26-31 has essentially the same warning as chapter 6. And when the Bible gives us warnings these must not be viewed as straw men. They suggest that there is real danger. As a former teacher of mine put it: “One does not go to the equator to sell snow shovels, when it never snows.”

In sum, then, it must be said, that the warnings against falling away are given to true believers. The writer clearly suggests the awful possibility of failing away from the living God. But that does not mean, of course, that God’s children need to fall away. In fact, Hebrews 6 continues with words of assurance: “Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation”(6:9).

There are a great many warnings in the Bible, just as there are many more words of assurance, but let these few illustrations suffice.

Concluding Remarks

The biblical teachings on the perseverance of the saints touch upon the profound mystery of how the divine initiative and the human response work together in the experience of salvation through Christ. If we stress divine sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility we will have difficulty in finding a place for the biblical warnings against apostasy. On the other hand, if we stress human responsibility at the expense of the Bible’s emphasis on God’s sovereign grace by which alone we can be saved, we may end up without assurance of salvation. Professor Mullins suggests, that “the New Testament teaching and Christian experience are

completely at one in keeping the divine and human aspects properly related to each other. In both there is clear recognition of God's initiative" (*The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 434).

It would be just as wrong to ignore the divine initiative and provision for our salvation as it would be to overlook the significance of the human response to God's offer salvation. God does not override our wills by irresistible grace, but by grace he enlists our wills so that we respond in faith and obedience to God's offer. And that is true also with respect to our security in Christ. We are kept by the power of God, as Peter puts it (I Pet. 1:5), but he adds an important prepositional phrase: "through faith." That addition reminds us that there is nothing mechanical about the perseverance of the believer. Instead of God building walls around us, so that we do not fall down the cliff, he builds walls within us so that we do not go too near the brink. He does that by warning us against sin, disobedience and hardening of the heart.

In the life of the church it is often more important that we manifest the right spirit toward those who read the Bible somewhat differently from the way we do, than to have our doctrinal formulations firmly nailed down. Throughout Charles Simeon's youth, this Cambridge divine witnessed the controversy between Calvinists and the Wesleys, and I would like to conclude with his own words concerning this dispute:

Here are two extremes, Calvinism and Arminianism (for you need not be told how long Calvin and Arminius lived before St. Paul). 'How do you move in reference to these, Paul? In a golden mean?' 'No!' 'To one extreme?' 'No!' 'How then?' 'To both extremes; today I am a strong Calvinist, tomorrow a strong Arminian.' 'Well, well, Paul, I see thou art beside thyself; go to Aristotle and learn the golden mean.' But I am unfortunate; I formerly read Aristotle and liked him much; I have since read Paul and caught somewhat of his strange notions, oscillating (not vacillating) from pole to pole. Sometimes I am a high

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Calvinist, at other times a low Arminian, so that if extremes will please you, I am your man; only remember, it is not one extreme that we are to go to, but both extremes. Now beloved brother, if I find you in the zenith on the one side, I shall hope to find you in the nadir on the other; and then we shall be ready (in the estimation of the world and of moderate Christians, who love the golden mean) to go to Bedlam together (H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon*, p. 77).

(This paper was given at the first study conference of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in December, 1956 under the auspices of the Board of Reference and Counsel.)

The Current Charismatic Movement

In the past few centuries there have been sincere Bible readers who came to the conclusion that our experience of salvation through Christ has at least two stages: one, conversion to Christ at the beginning of Christian life, and two, a post-conversion experience that lifts believers to a higher spiritual level in their life of faith.

These two stages of our salvation-experience, however, have been understood in different ways. Some Puritans held that conversion, which marked the beginning of the Christian life, should be followed by a second experience, subsequent to conversion, when the believer received the confirmation of membership in the family of God, i.e. the assurance of salvation. In the Wesleyan tradition, justification by faith, which happened at conversion, should be followed by an experience of sanctification, sometimes called "Christian perfection." This two-stage salvation experience is reflected in Toplady's hymn, "Be of sin the double cure, Save from wrath and make me pure." Another way of expressing this "holiness" teaching was by distinguishing between the penalty of sin, which was said to be removed at conversion, and deliverance from the power of sin, in a post-conversion experience. This was sometimes called the "second blessing," and was popularized by the Keswick movement.

Although this so-called second blessing was understood quite differently in the various renewal movements of the past, a number of them described it as a "baptism with the Spirit." Some Puritans called the experience of receiving assurance of salvation a baptism with the Spirit. In Methodist circles "entire sanctification" was sometimes called a baptism of the Spirit (J. D. G. Dunn, "Spirit-

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Baptism and Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), p. 399). Keswick leaders preferred to describe the second blessing as the filling with the Spirit. In America, through the influence of teachers, such as R. A. Torrey, the baptism with the Spirit came to stand for the empowerment for prayer and service in the kingdom of God.

With the rise of Pentecostalism (Topeka, Kansas, 1900, Los Angeles, 1906), the second work of grace received a new definition. The baptism of the Spirit was seen as a post-conversion experience whereby the believer was elevated to a higher level of the Christian life, and the proof that one had had the second blessing was the gift of tongues. Some Pentecostal believers, who had a background in the so-called “holiness” teaching, continued to define the second blessing in terms of a new stage in sanctification and saw in the baptism of the Spirit a third stage in the experience of salvation.

Pentecostalism was severely criticized by other denominations (including our own) in the early decades of this century, but today there is widespread recognition of this “third force” in Christendom (along with Protestantism and Catholicism). Since the 1960s Pentecostal teachings have penetrated even main-line denominations. Central to Pentecostalism is its emphasis on the baptism with the Holy Spirit. This has stimulated much thought and study in non-Pentecostal circles on the work of the Spirit. One can hardly say any longer that the Spirit is the “forgotten member of the Trinity.” In fact, there has been such a strong focus on the Spirit of late, that perhaps we need to be reminded of what Jesus said, namely, that the Spirit would glorify “him” (John 16:14).

However, since there is still much questioning in our churches about the more recent charismatic movement, which has flowed out of Pentecostalism, we have been asked to bring some of the New Testament texts, that speak of the work of the Spirit, to bear upon our current situation. In this paper, then, we shall (1) look at some of the key passages in the book of Acts in which Luke records the coming of the Spirit upon different groups of people; then (2) we want to survey the texts in Acts that speak of the fulness of the Spirit; thirdly (3) we need to inquire into the meaning of the baptism

with the Spirit. In conclusion we want to ask ourselves: which are the weaknesses and the strengths of the current charismatic movement? Hopefully, this brief study can help us in developing proper attitudes toward the renewal movements in our day.

I. The Gift of The Spirit in Acts

The first reference to the baptism with the Spirit is found in Acts 1:5, where Jesus identifies the baptism with Pentecost. "John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

A. The Gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2)

At the Jewish Pentecost described in Acts 2, the 120 suddenly heard a noise from heaven like that of a strong wind, and tongues of fire appeared. These external phenomena left the recipients in no doubt about the coming of the Spirit of the risen Christ. Immediately following this unique, historic event, the apostles proclaimed the mighty acts of God in other tongues. The festival visitors could all have understood either Greek or Aramaic but by speaking in such a manner that they heard the gospel in their local dialects, God broke through the language barriers that had been created long ago, when God frustrated humanity's rebellion against him by the confusion of tongues. We have no evidence from the New Testament that this miracle of Pentecost was ever repeated as far as preaching the gospel is concerned.

The receipt of the Spirit at Pentecost is described in different ways: Jesus spoke of it as a baptism with the Spirit (Acts 1:5); he promised his disciples that the Spirit would "come upon" them (Acts 1:8); when the Spirit came they were "filled with" the Holy Spirit (2:4); and Peter promised that if people would repent, believe, be baptized, they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38).

Pentecost was a water-shed in the history of salvation. It was the fulfilment of Old Testament hopes (Acts 2:29-33), the beginning of the age to come, or, to put it differently, the beginning of "the

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last days” (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). The gift of the Spirit was the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise (Gal. 3:14); it was the birthday of the church. The apostles who witnessed the coming of the Spirit were to be the foundation stones on which the church was built (Eph. 2:20). They were witnesses to Jesus’ teachings, his mighty works, and his death and resurrection prior to Pentecost. Now they had experienced Pentecost. Christians today cannot repeat in their personal lives what these “founding Fathers” of the church experienced on that first Christian Pentecost.

B. The Coming of the Spirit on the Samaritans (Acts 8)

As a result of Philip’s preaching in Samaria, new converts were won for the Christian faith. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard the good news, they sent Peter and John to them, who then prayed over the Samaritan believers and they received the Holy Spirit.

According to Romans 8:9 all believers receive the gift of the Spirit when they put their faith in Christ. Why then this unusual experience of the Samaritans? (a) Some hold that the Samaritans were not true Christians until they received the Spirit. (b) It has even been suggested that the receipt of the Spirit, when the apostles prayed over them speaks of “confirmation” following their conversion earlier. (c) In charismatic circles this is a key passage in support of two-stage salvation experience: first they were converted and received the Spirit (although the latter is not stated), and then followed a second work of grace which is called the “baptism with the Spirit.”

But none of these approaches do justice to the text. F. F. Bruce gives us an interpretation that fits the facts (*The Book of Acts*, p. 182). He suggests that because of centuries of bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans, these Samaritan believers were given this special, external evidence of the gift of the Spirit, in order to assure them that they were now bona fide Christians on par with the Jewish believers of the Mother Church. Also, the apostles themselves needed to see with their own eyes that God had indeed given his Spirit to Samaritans, for they may have found it hard to believe that

Samaritans had become Christians in the same way that Jews had become members of the body of Christ. It would appear, then, that God had delayed the giving of the Spirit to the Samaritan believers for the sake of the Samaritans, but also for the sake of the apostles.

The event is unique and the story is descriptive, not normative for Christian experience, as other conversion stories in Acts clearly illustrate.

C. The Receipt of the Spirit by Paul (Acts 9)

There are those who maintain that Paul was converted on the Damascus Road and baptized with the Spirit three days later. It should be noticed, however, that Luke reports that Saul was "filled" with the Spirit (Acts 9:17). One must view Paul's conversion experience and his call to evangelize the Gentiles as a whole. It is fanciful to divide his Damascus Road experience and the visit and prayer of Ananias a few days later. Paul did not distinguish between the commission he received on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:15ff.) and the commission received through Ananias (22:13ff.). A man whose loyalties to Judaism ran so deep, needed a few days to have his *Weltanschauung* changed so completely. As he called on the name of the Lord, had his sins washed away (Acts 22:16), was filled with the Spirit and baptized (9:17,18;22:16), Paul became a new man in Christ.

D. The Falling of the Spirit on the Gentiles (Acts 10)

As Peter proclaimed the gospel to those gathered in the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the Word (Acts 10:44). This surprised the Jewish believers (10:45). Evidently to convince them of this fact, we have an outbreak of glossolalia, as these Gentiles came out of darkness into the light (10:46).

Whereas Peter, at Pentecost, exhorted his hearers to repent and be baptized in order to receive the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:37ff.), here the gift of the Spirit is received as they listen to the gospel. They are then baptized (10:47,48), and that shows that Luke does

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not put the different aspects of conversion in the same order in every account of conversion. Whereas in the case of the Samaritans baptism preceded the receipt of the Spirit, in this case the Spirit was received before baptism. God's Spirit cannot be locked into a fixed order. It is like the wind that blows where it wills (John 3:8). Another illustration of the freedom of the Spirit can be found in Acts 19.

E. The Coming of the Spirit on the Disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19)

Paul came to Ephesus where he encountered some disciples of John the Baptist. He must have taken them to be Christian believers but then sensed that something was missing. And so he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" But they confessed their ignorance about the Holy Spirit, for they knew only of Johannine baptism, which was preparatory in nature. Paul then taught them about Jesus, and they were then baptized. When Paul laid his hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit, and as happened in the case of the Gentile converts, they spoke in tongues.

This passage, like the one in Acts 8, is another plank in the teaching that salvation is experienced in two stages. It is based on an interpretation of this passage in which it is insisted that these Johannine disciples were genuine Christians before Paul met them (that they are called "disciples" does not prove that). What happened here, then, according to this line of thought is the baptism with the Spirit. However, what we have is, a baptism with water and the receipt of the Spirit. There are only two references in which the coming of the Spirit upon believers is connected with the laying on of the hands of the apostles (Acts 8:17; 19:6). Hull thinks that Luke made mention of these two occasions because they were so exceptional (J. H. E. Hull, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 118).

These disciples of the Baptist may have known about the coming of the Spirit (for John predicted that), but evidently they did not know that Pentecost had occurred. They were still living on the other side of Pentecost. This view seems to be supported by the fact

that they received Christian baptism after Paul explained the gospel to them, even though they had earlier received Johannine baptism. The speaking in tongues that is mentioned here, as it was in the case of the believers in the household of Cornelius, seems to have been of a different kind than the preaching of the gospel in other tongues on the day of Pentecost. Very likely it refers to prayer and praise and song.

The two passages in Acts in which the baptizing work of the Spirit is mentioned speak of the Pentecost event (Acts 1:5; 11:16) and not of a second blessing or second work of grace in the experience of the believer. However, Luke repeatedly speaks of believers being filled with the Spirit, and we must do a brief survey of the "fulness passages."

II. The Fulness of The Spirit in Acts

A. Fulness and Witness

When the disciples were "all filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4) on the day of Pentecost, they gave powerful witness to the work of God in Christ. And when Peter and John were later dragged before the Sanhedrin, Peter "filled with the Holy Spirit" addressed the court in a powerful impromptu testimony (Acts 4:8). Later when the apostles were released from prison and they reported to the praying company of friends, "they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (4:31).

In the prophecy of Joel which was fulfilled at Pentecost it was said: "I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophecy" (quoted by Peter in Acts 2:18). Moreover, Jesus had promised his disciples that they would be his witnesses after the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8), and these prophetic words were now being fulfilled. "Pentecost momentarily placed in sharp and dramatic relief that the Church that came into being in her New Testament form is a speaking, proclaiming Church and that she addresses all men and all nations with her message" (H. R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* p. 102).

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B. Fulness and Courage

No one reading the book of Acts can but be impressed by the courage of the early believers, including the apostles. Not too many days previous to Pentecost they were in hiding for fear of the Jews, but the coming of the Spirit changed all that. It is not accidental that the word *parresia* (or *parresiazomai*)--freedom, openness, boldness, especially in speech, occurs some twelve times in Acts.

The same Peter who had denied his Lord in such cowardly manner, impressed the Sanhedrin with his "boldness" (Acts 4:13). How can we explain the change? He was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:8). And what gave other believers the courage to proclaim the Word of God? It was the fulness of the Spirit (Acts 4:31). Of Stephen, who dared to challenge the basic structures of Judaism, it is said twice that he was full of the Spirit (Acts 6:5; 7:55). And Paul, filled with the Spirit, dared to confront Elymas, the court magician (Acts 13:9).

Courage did not come to these early Christians any easier than it does to us. It was not a character trait. Only the fulness of the Spirit gave them courage in the face of threats, imprisonment and even death.

C. Fulness and Service

In order to regulate the matter of Christian charity in the Jerusalem church, the apostles instructed the church to appoint seven men "full of the Spirit" (Acts 6:3), who would supervise this ministry. Stephen, who heads the list, was a man "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). Serving at tables may be thought of as a rather humble ministry, but in the kingdom of God we need the help of the Spirit in all areas of Christian service.

D. Fulness and Daily Life

The fulness of the Spirit, according to the book of Acts, is associated with the daily life of the believer more often than with

charismatic gifts. Several times the fulness of the Spirit is mentioned in connection with living a blameless life. The seven men chosen to serve at tables were to be men "of good report, full of the Spirit" (Acts 6:3). Of Barnabas it is said, that he was "a good man and full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24).

Of both Stephen and Barnabas it is said, that they were full of the Spirit and faith (Acts 6:5; 11:24). Faith here certainly does not mean doctrine, but rather it refers to trust, confidence, commitment. To be full of the Spirit and to be full of faith are almost synonymous in these passages. Also it is mentioned twice that Stephen was a man of wisdom (Acts 6:3; 6:10). The distribution of relief to the poor demanded wisdom from above.

Occasionally the fulness of the Spirit is seen as expressing itself in joy. Of the young converts at Antioch of Pisidia it is said that they "were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). The note of joy is sounded throughout the book of Acts. Hull says, "Indeed, so closely does Luke identify joy and the gift of the Spirit that it is not unreasonable to suppose that in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch and the Philippian jailor and his household he used 'rejoiced' as a synonym for 'received the Holy Spirit' (Acts 8:39; 16:34) (J. H. E. Hull, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 150). In Paul's writings "joy" and "the Holy Spirit" frequently stand in close proximity to each other (Rom. 14:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:18). That Christian joy is not simply euphoria can be seen from the fact that it is present in the midst of suffering (e.g., 1 Thess. 1:6; Acts 13:42).

In the writings of Paul there is only one reference to the fulness of the Spirit and that is found also within the context of living the Christian life. In Ephesians 5:18 the apostle exhorts believers to be filled with the Spirit. The present tense of the verb suggests that being filled with the Spirit is something ongoing, and the imperative mood points to the need for the response of the believer to God's offer. The exhortation to be filled with the Spirit is related to a careful walk (Eph. 5:15), to ethical discernment (vv. 16,17). It is seen as the opposite to drunkenness which leads to debauchery (v.

18). Moreover, it is related also to Christian worship, for the fulness of the Spirit expresses itself in joyful song and thanksgiving.

Whereas in Old Testament times the fulness of the Spirit was reserved for a privileged few (e.g., Bezaleel, Joshua), this privilege is now open to all the people of God. Interestingly, nowhere in the New Testament do we ever hear of a believer claiming to be full of the Spirit; it is an observation that others make about fellow members of the church.

III. The Baptism of The Spirit

John the Baptist, standing at the dawn of the new age, spoke modestly of his preparatory role: "I baptize with water but the one coming after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mark 1:8). After his resurrection our Lord reminded his disciples of what the Baptist had said: "John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. The only other passage in Acts which mentions the baptism of the Spirit is 11:16, where Peter says, that he remembered the word of the Lord, "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (again referring to the Pentecost event).

All four Gospels have the promise of the Baptist that the coming One will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The two passages in Acts make it clear that this baptism took place at Pentecost. In Christian baptism, water and Spirit are two aspects of initiation into the Christian life, but when the water baptism of John is mentioned, then it stands in contrast to the baptism with the Spirit.

The only other reference to the baptism with the Spirit is found in I Corinthians 12:12,13. To the question of how the unity of the body of Christ is constituted, Paul says that all the members have been baptized by one Spirit into one body. We would do violence to this text if we forced it to say, that it referred to a post-conversion experience, for the apostle is speaking of incorporation into the body of Christ. The metaphor of baptism with the Spirit is no doubt taken from water baptism. Water is often a symbol of the Holy

Spirit both in the Old as well as the New Testament (John 7:38,39), and so we should not be surprised to find verbs such as “pouring,” “filling,” “baptizing,” or “drinking” connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

By the Spirit believers become members of the body of Christ. This body of Christ is found in miniature in local congregations, such as Corinth, as can be seen from the reference to Jews and Greeks, slaves and free (I Cor. 13:13). The concept of an “invisible” body of Christ is not a New Testament concept.

To strengthen his statement that all Corinthians had been baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s body, Paul adds, that they were all made to drink of, or “saturated” with (*potizo*) the same Spirit. Baptism with the Spirit, then, refers, first, to the inauguration of the church at Pentecost (so the Gospels and Acts), and, second, to the initiation of believers into the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:12,13). John R. Stott writes, “The baptism (of the Spirit) was a unique initiatory experience; the fullness was intended to be the continuing, the permanent result, the norm. As an initiatory event the baptism is not repeatable and cannot be lost, but the filling can be repeated and in any case needs to be maintained” (J. R. W. Stott, *The Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit*, p. 25).

We realize, of course, that some people describe a profound post conversion experience, which has transformed their life, as a baptism with the Spirit. We would not want to quibble with them about the reality and the significance of such an experience. However, one should be a bit more circumspect in the use of biblical language. When the baptism with the Spirit is used in specific ways in the New Testament, it leads to confusion when it is then made to mean something else. It would be the part of wisdom if post-conversion experiences were described rather as infillings with the Spirit, than baptisms.

Concluding Remarks

Our study has focused on the gift of the Spirit, the fulness of the Spirit, and the baptism with the Spirit. We have limited

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ourselves largely to Acts, because the current charismatic movement draws much of its teachings from this book. One other important aspect of charismatic theology, which needs to be investigated, is that of spiritual gifts, the so called *charismata*, but space will not allow us to include the teachings of the apostles on this topic in this volume. We should, however, like to give a few perspectives that may be of help to us, as we seek to come to terms with current spiritual renewal movements.

A. Apparent Dangers in the Current Charismatic Movement

One danger that is inherent in all renewal movements is that there is an over-emphasis on experience. As long as we are in the body and live in the present age we must learn to live by faith in the midst of frustrations, trials, tears, and the shadow of death. Our emotional life cannot be held at high pitch constantly.

Another danger that arises when people have mountain peak spiritual experiences, is that they tend to make their experience normative for others. This is particularly a temptation for believers who have lived their Christian life at a low level, as they see it in retrospect, and who have experienced breakthroughs that appear to transform their lives.

Also, there is always the temptation to read the Scriptures in the light of one's experiences and to find biblical grounds for one's own experience. One can so easily misinterpret and misuse the Bible in an effort to substantiate one's experience with references to biblical passages.

However, we are not suggesting that believers should not and do not experience Christ and the power of his Spirit in new ways. In fact the apostles encourage us to be renewed in our inner life (e.g. Rom. 12:1,2). But when people experience God in new ways, or when they are empowered by the Spirit's gifts for new ministries, there is the temptation to become spiritually proud and to look down on those who are not gifted in the same way. We have a good illustration of this in the Corinthian church, and Paul had to remind

his converts that the fruit of the Spirit (e.g., love, I Cor. 13) is more important than the gifts of the Spirit

B. Spiritual Needs that Appear to Have Surfaced Through the Charismatic Movement

The charismatic movement reminds us that doctrinal correctness is not all there is to the Christian life. And although we must caution against focusing solely on experience in the Christian life, a wintry sort of Christianity does not meet the deepest needs of the believer's heart. The current renewal movement calls us to examine our spiritual indifference and lethargy.

Also the charismatic movement is a call for the revitalization of our worship services. There appears to be a need for more unstructured and spontaneous worship. We should not view this as a threat to the life of our church but find new ways in which to express our faith. The desire for greater intimacy in fellowship with other believers suggests that our larger congregations should allow for the development of smaller fellowship groups.

Moreover, the charismatic movement has focused, in a new way, on the gifts of the Spirit--a subject that has often been sadly overlooked. Some, in fact, have taught that the gift of tongues, prophecy, healing, and so forth, should be restricted to the apostolic age. But we have no reason, on the basis of the New Testament, to insist that some of the gifts mentioned in the apostolic writings passed away, while others, such as the gift of teaching, have remained. And so we ought to be grateful to the current renewal movements for forcing us to take a more careful look at what the New Testament has to say about spiritual gifts.

C. What Attitudes Should We Foster in the Light of the Charismatic Movement

First, we must learn to cultivate a magnanimous spirit toward those who have found renewal in this movement. Just because there have been excesses among the so-called "charismatics" (there

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usually are in every renewal movement), or just because some who speak in tongues have made themselves somewhat obnoxious upon occasion, we should not condemn the whole movement. It is unfortunate that some of those who have experienced spiritual renewal in recent times have caused disruption in some of our congregations, but we cannot condemn all of them out of hand as heretics.

Second, we should try to put the current renewal movements into historical perspective. We should remember that in all such movements the spurious and the genuine often get mixed up, and so it is not always obvious whether the experiences of people are authentic or spurious. Our concern should be that we seek to serve God with the gifts he has given us. "The powerless non-Pentecostal Christian has a need no different from that of the powerless Pentecostal Christian" (J. D. G. Dunn, "Spirit Baptism and Pentecostalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology*. 23 (1970), p. 406).

Third, we ought always be open for the work of God's Spirit in our lives. Perhaps the Spirit is saying something to our churches through the charismatic movement that we should be hearing. Openness, however, does not exclude discernment, which is also a gift of the Spirit. We cannot deny that many lives have been transformed by what is called (wrongly) a "baptism with the Spirit." If our spiritual pilgrimage is different from those who have found renewal in the charismatic movement, let us not be so prejudiced that we cannot see the grace of God at work in new and sometimes extraordinary ways.

The apostle Peter, in the only passage in which he uses the word *charisma* (I Pet. 4:10), exhorts us, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." May that be our concern and our prayer!

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Covenant Community and Mission

“Covenant community” is not, strictly speaking, a biblical phrase. The idea, however, is implicit in the New Testament concept of the church, the people of God. The Christian church, of course, has its roots in the Old Testament, where God chooses Israel and makes a covenant with a people which he had redeemed from slavery. The nation of Israel later broke the covenant through disobedience and idolatry, and out of that failure the prophetic promises of a new covenant are born. There were, of course, always those within the apostate nation who remained true to the covenant, and it is this genuine people of God that provides us with the connecting link between the old and new covenant community. Jesus established a new covenant by his death, and the members of this new covenant, the church, stand in continuity, not with Israel as a nation, but with the true children of Abraham who lived in the times prior to the coming of Christ.

And just as the covenant people of the Old Testament were called to carry the light of divine revelation to the nations, so the members of the new covenant have been called to proclaim *tas aretas* (virtues, praises, mighty deeds, victories) of the one who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9). This proclamation is to take place not simply behind the walls of the church but in the world (J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, p. 122).

To speak of the mission of the covenant community is another way of discussing the meaning of the priesthood of all believers. This was an important doctrine for Luther and other Reformers in the sixteenth century. But perhaps no one saw the missionary implications of this concept as clearly as the Anabaptists. For them it meant not only that every believer could come to God in prayer,

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could read and apply the Scriptures to themselves, but also that every member of the covenant community had a role to play in the ongoing mission of the church. G. H. Williams, the great Reformation scholar, writes: "In the stress upon personal accountability and explicit faith, the whole of the Radical Reformation pushed the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in the direction of a universal lay apostolate" (*The Radical Reformation*, p. 845).

The heirs of the sixteenth century Anabaptists have not always been faithful to this apostolic calling, to bring the gospel to the nations, and so we need to remind ourselves from time to time, that to be members of the new people of God, a covenant community, is to be involved in mission. We begin by reminding ourselves of the missionary calling of the church.

I. The Missionary Calling of The Church

A. *The Apostolic Character of the Church.*

The church is missionary or else it is not a church (J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, p. 120). Only if we misunderstand either the "church" or the "mission" can these two be divorced one from the other. To participate in Christ is to share in his mission. "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). There is no other kind of church, according to the New Testament, than the "apostolic," the "sent" church; and this does not mean that missions is the hobby of a few devout souls. The church is not engaged in mission as a wealthy man who throws crumbs to a beggar, but as a farmer who sows precious seed, fully aware that his very life depends on the harvest. Mission is not optional, but the life of the church withers without it (O. Piper, in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, edited by D. A. McGavran, p. 195).

The *notae ecclesiae* of the early church were not only the "sacraments", not only unity, holiness and catholicity, but, as the book of Acts so clearly suggests: "apostolicity." On the day of Pentecost the apostles proclaimed the mighty acts of God in the

native tongues of the many visitors who had come to the festival. And thereby God indicated that the people of the new covenant were to be a proclaiming people. From Jerusalem the good news spread to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The missionary societies that emerged in the eighteenth and 19th centuries represented a reaction against the failure of the post-Reformation churches to understand themselves as apostolic. Unfortunately, because these mission societies functioned largely "outside" the church, they tended to blind the church to its missionary vocation (C. W. Williams, *Where In the World*, p. 46). It led to the embarrassing division of the members of the church into those who were engaged in mission and those who were not--a division that at times tended to be as monstrous as the cleavage between clergy and laity in the Medieval Church. Mission became the concern of the "missionary minded" within the church, and on the Continent these *Missionsfreunde* who frequently formed *koinonia* groups, tended to think of themselves as the "true" church (G. Hoffmann, "Gedanken zum Problem der Integration von Kirche und Mission in Deutschland," *EMZ* IV, 1968, 202). (One still senses upon occasion this holier-than-thou attitude on the part of those engaged directly and formally in "mission".) Neither *missionslose* churches nor *kirchenlose* mission societies are the New Testament ideal. Where obedience to the Great Commission is lacking, we do not have a "true" church. Mission is part of the very nature of the church. Of course, one can have a biblical theology of the church and still not be apostolic. Only the Holy Spirit can make a church truly missionary in character.

In our Mennonite churches we do stress the work of the Holy Spirit, but perhaps at times in a somewhat one-sided manner. We recognize the need for the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of the members of the church, but we do not always see the need for the power of the Spirit in carrying out our mission in the world. To speak figuratively, the emphases has been more on the "holy" and less on the "Spirit" (the dynamic of mission), and such a one-sided emphasis can turn the church in on itself rather than out to the world (F. W. Dillistone, "The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission," in

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The Theology of the Christian Mission, edited by G. H. Anderson, p. 279). When this happens the church loses its apostolic character and spends her energy in her effort to keep the Christian community pure. On the other hand, "a church that knows that she is a function of the apostolate and that her very ground of existence lies in the proclamation of the Kingdom to the world, does not engage in missions, but she herself becomes mission, she becomes the living outreach of God to the world" (J.C. Hoedendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, p. 43).

Closely allied with the idea of the apostolicity of the church is the New Testament emphasis on the charismatic structure of the covenant community.

B. The Charismatic Structure of the Church

The church is a foundation of the Spirit, God's eschatological gift for the "last days." The whole church, as well as each member of the Christian community, is a creation of God's Spirit (Eph. 2:17-22; 1 Cor. 3:16f.). By the Spirit the members of the church are baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit dwells in the members of the church (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19-20). It is the Spirit who equips the believers for the work of ministry (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11). "Charisms are not special marks of distinction belonging to a chosen few, whether on account of their enthusiasm or of their office in the Church, but a distinguishing mark of the whole Church, of the fellowship of all believers" (Hans Kueng, *The Church*, p. 187).

Where only the ecclesiastical officials (church workers, ordained or unordained, usually paid by the church to devote their time to the service of the church), rather than all the members of the congregation, are active in mission, we have grave reason to wonder whether the Spirit has not been sacrificed along with its gifts (Kueng, *op. cit.*, p. 187). The charisms of leadership in the early church did not produce a "ruling class"--an aristocracy of those endowed with the Spirit. Every member of the body of Christ was believed to be charismatically endowed, and this represented both

the call to service and the ability to perform it. The Christian message spread with such speed in the first century of the Christian era because every member of the church (including women) shared his or her faith according to their ability and opportunity (Acts 4:31; 8:4; 11:19; 1 Thess. 1:8). If every member of the church is to serve with the charisma which he or she has received (I Pet. 4:10), it is obvious that the mission of the church must be carried out by the church as a whole and not alone by representatives of the church. Eduard Schweizer makes the observation that

The life or death of a church depends on how much its members are willing to proclaim the gospel to the world. If its ministers are satisfied merely with performing their functions and counseling religious people, if its members confess their faith just as far as it is socially acceptable, the church will grow more and more into a sterile institution that is far from the living church of the New Testament ("The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," in *Neotestamentica*, 1963, p. 317).

This raises the thorny question of the place of the "separated" ministry in the church. In the Roman catholic tradition "the ministry" was traditionally thought of as constituting the *esse* of the church; in Protestantism there has been no agreement on this question. Either "the ministry" was thought of as receiving its authority from Christ or from the congregation (preferably from both). It is easier to show from the New Testament that the whole church has received authority from Christ to perform its service in the world, than it is to define the "ordained" ministry. The Reformation emphasis on the priesthood of all believers did not prevent most of European Christianity from becoming cleric-centered. It was in the Left Wing of the Reformation that the laity assumed serious responsibility for carrying the faith to the world (H. Grimes, *The Rebirth of the Laity*, p. 52ff.). In America the separation of church and state has helped to make the laity more responsible than in state-churches in which the clergy are paid by the

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state. Unfortunately much of North American church life has become “program centered”--another subtle way of short-circuiting the mission of the church. When as many lay people of the local congregation as possible are involved in service within the congregation, they tend to lose sight of the church’s mission in the world. And if the various committee members see themselves as “the minister’s helpers”, then the church again becomes clergy centered.

Hoekendijk writes:

Where the layman is permitted to be only an “aid to the minister” (and then, inevitably becomes a copy of the clergyman), where he is considered only as a more or less “active member,” there he is pulled out of the world and loses his function as apostle. The result would be that our concept of the church becomes clericalized, and that from then on we can be engaged only in a somewhat peripheral mission (*The Church Inside Out*, p. 85).

Perhaps the crassest example of a clericalized layman today is the deacon. Beginning as a servant of the needy, he “rose” to become the assistant of the pastor or bishop. Hoedendijk calls him the “respectable displaced person” (*Op.cit.*, p. 85).

It would be wrong to suggest the abolition of the “separated” ministry; nor should the significance of such ministries be minimized. The members of the church will fulfill their mission in the world only if they are properly instructed and nourished in their faith by pastors and teachers. “Ministers” are there for the purpose of equipping the saints “for the work of ministry” (omitting the fateful comma, Eph. 4:12).

The congregation is not there for the the sake of the minister, but the minister is to equip the church for its ministry in the world. The members of the church have not fulfilled their mission by faithfully participating in Sunday worship services; their mission is carried out when they are scattered during the week. By loading “church jobs” on the members of the church, ministers, with the best

of intentions, make it impossible for some of these members to carry on a mission in the world. George Williams points out, that in the Radical Reformation one is impressed to see "the mobility, the purposefulness, and the testimonial missionary urgency of every convert, whether a commissioned elder or a steadfast wife of a weaver evangelist" (*The Radical Reformation*, p. 845).

We need to recapture the original meaning of *laikos* (i.e., belonging to the *laos*, the people of God). More often than we care to admit a layman is viewed as the one not competent in "spiritual things," since he does not have theological training, and what is worse: he lives his life in a "secular" calling in contrast to the man who has been set apart for a spiritual ministry. If, however, we take the charismatic structure of the church seriously, the worship, fellowship, and teaching services of the congregation will be seen in their proper perspective; we will have a high view of the "separated" or "ordained" ministry and, at the same time, the whole church will become more conscious of its missionary calling and will be encouraged to be the church in the diaspora. But, as Tom Allan wrote (after first-hand experience): "The idea of the lay apostolate presents us with an inescapable challenge . . . because, if it is taken seriously, it will mean upheaval and revolution within the conventional framework of the church's life" (Quoted by A. D. Kelley, *The People of God*, p. 23).

C. The Diaconic Spirit of the Church

In a sense the mission of the church has its roots in the incarnation of our Lord, who came "not to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). Not only must the ordained ministers demonstrate servanthood, but the church as a whole, and each member in particular, must learn to be a servant in the world. If a high percentage of the monies collected by the congregation, and most of the energy of its members is spent on the congregation itself, there is something not quite right. Nor is the inordinate craving that some churches (and often the pastors) have for costly houses of worship, is not the best expression of

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servanthood. It may be simply a sign that a congregation is suffering from a local “edifice complex” (C. W. Williams, *Where In the World*, p. 12).

Smaller congregations (or denominations) at times have a hankering for the external evidence of strength which they see in larger churches (such as a large staff, impressive headquarters, etc.). A certain amount of this is, of course, necessary to help the churches become better servants in the world, but a church that becomes preoccupied with preserving itself and its structures is in danger of losing its vision for the world.

Our Lord was supremely the *diakonos*, indeed, the suffering servant (Matt. 20:25-28; Luke 22:27; Phil. 2:7; John 13). “As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Implied in this saying of our Lord is that the church must carry on its mission in Christ’s spirit, which is the spirit of servanthood. But how will this express itself?

II. The Expression of The Church’s Apostolicity

It is not our intention here to suggest new ways in which the church can express its missionary vocation. The Spirit of God is free to lead God’s people into new avenues of witness from time to time. Our methods of carrying out our mission in the world must be in harmony with the purposes of our mission: to win others for Christ. The charismatic structure of the church suggests, that individual members of the church will carry out their mission in different ways. In our society most of them will spend at least five days of the week “in the world.” They are a projection of the church, where Christ’s lordship is already confessed, into a world where Christ is not yet acknowledged as Lord. But this is the world for which Christ died (John 3:16). If the church is to witness to God’s redeeming grace, it will have to do this primarily through the members who are engaged in the life of the world where they work (S. C. Neill, *Christian Missions*, p. 573).

A. The Informal Witness

Much of the witnessing of the "scattered" church will have to be done in an informal way. A question which arises at this point is, whether the daily work of the members of the church is a form of witness as such. Most Christians believe that their mundane daily tasks are in a sense sacralized when they give a portion of their income to the work of the Kingdom of God. But what about the work as such? When Paul encouraged the slaves to work honestly and heartily because they were serving the Lord Christ (Col. 3:24), who would reward them for their labors, was he not suggesting that the believer's daily work is a divine service? Stephen Neill has challenged this approach with the saying: "When all is mission, nothing is mission," but that would appear to me not to be entirely true. A. T. Hanson makes the observation that our daily "secular" work is our spiritual sacrifice to God, for we give our bodies (persons) to it (Rom. 12:1,2) (*The Church of the Servant*, p.97). There is always a danger of defining "Christian service" only in terms of its relation to the church, the denomination, or some Christian institution.

It is understood, of course, that a believer would not wish to be involved in work which contributes to humankind's harm. On the other hand, the Christian layperson should not feel that just because he or she is not directly involved in church committee meetings, or does not sing in the choir, or has not been commissioned for some particular kind of church service, that he or she is on a lower rung of the ladder spiritually.

Eugene Nida points out that any real church growth depends on the life of the laity in the workaday world: "Formal communication is rarely as important as informal sharing--for example the casual remarks people make about their faith and the opinions and rumors that they spread about the behavior of church members" ("Dynamics of Church Growth," in *Growth and Christian Mission*, edited by McGavran, p. 180). This leads us to suggest, that the manner of life of the individual church members at the place of work (as well as off work) is one of the most effective ways in

which the church fulfills its missionary vocation. Where, for example, a Christian factory worker gives evidence of the joy which comes from forgiveness, of the living hope which bears him up in trials, of moral integrity which comes out of commitment to Christ, and of a love which enables him to enter into the anxiety, loneliness and other needs of his fellow-laborers, he gives a mighty testimony to God's grace. "The serene, silent beauty of a holy life is the most powerful influence in the world, next to the might of the Spirit of God," said Pascal. Unfortunately, Christians often appear as victimized by circumstances and just as depressed about their lot as unbelievers. To be sure, Christian ethics can also be a sign of the world's estrangement from God, and so the believer may have to bear the cross like our Lord, on account of his or her Christian life.

We must take much more seriously the possibilities of Christian mission in the course of living and working in the world. Nor must we overlook the great opportunities that offer themselves in the "workless days." There is a crying need for a theology of leisure, which takes into account the missionary vocation of the church.

Not all work that believers perform in everyday life permits them to relate to non-Christian people naturally. Some professions, especially the "helping" professions (e.g. medicine, social work, food banks, etc.), bring God's people closer to the lives of non-Christians, and open up rewarding avenues of service. The ministry of compassion in some form or another is, of course, part and parcel of the life of faith, regardless of our profession, but we should encourage our young people who are choosing vocations to lean toward those which bring them closer to people's needs.

The manner in which we carry out our mission may vary all the way from Christian courtesy to the verbal sharing of the good news with friends and neighbors. Perhaps one of the most potent instruments of the church's mission is the Christian family, which is a kind of microcosm of the church in the world.

B. The Formal Witness

Besides the informal, the incidental ways of witnessing to our

faith, there are the more formal settings in which the gospel can be proclaimed, either in word or in deed. The word "formal" is used here in the sense of corporate, organized, structured. Although individual members of the church can minister to the needy in everyday life, there are needs in the world that can be met only if the wider community addresses them. I mention the ministry of compassion first, because there are many evangelical Christians who think lightly of this form of witness or they think of such ministry merely as a means to a higher end: the salvation of souls. And while that is indeed the goal of our mission efforts, the ministry of compassion has an authenticity by and of itself.

It should be noted that in the early church there does not seem to have been a tension between the ministry of compassion and that of proclamation. When Paul was first sent out on a mission by the church of Antioch, it was with famine relief for the poor in Jerusalem. Later the church commissioned him to proclaim the gospel in the world. But even as he did that, he never forgot to collect monies for the poor (Gal. 2:10). L. E. Cooke makes this observation: "Wenn die Verkuendigung des Reiches, Proklamation seiner souverainen Herrschaft ist, sind die Dienste der Liebe und Solidaritaet, die sichtbaren Zeichen dieser Herrschaft und seines Wohnens unter uns" ("Auf dem Wege zu einer Theologie zwischenkirchlicher Hilfe," *EMM*, III (1967), 51).

In the spreading of the gospel by word of mouth individual members of the Christian community will also take part. This makes it imperative that the pastors and teachers of the church instruct the congregation in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. The pulpit ministry can accomplish this in part, but other occasions will have to be found to supplement this teaching ministry. A Christian education program in the local church will be of great help.

Also, the preaching services of the church should be structured in such a way that interested inquirers do not feel entirely out of place. The sermons do not need to be evangelistic in emphasis to be winsome. As the ministers of the Word expound the great truths of the Scripture for the congregation, seekers learn to understand what the Christian faith is all about.

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In order to be effective in its proclamation of the gospel, the local church must strive to have a good reputation in the community. The church should be known for its acceptance of people from the community regardless of race, color or economic status. Above all the church must demonstrate that it is a *koinonia* where love and forgiveness are exercised. It was with reference to the church's mission in the world that our Lord prayed for the unity of the believers (John 17:21). Standing amidst the broken homes, hopes and ideals, the world must be able to observe one fellowship where healing for its brokenness can be found (H. R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, p. 203). The unity of the church is a great missionary instrument given to the church. And this unity should not only characterize the local congregation but should be seen also in joint evangelistic efforts, joint ministries of compassion, and other joint efforts with other churches in the community to spread the good news.

Having suggested a few ways in which the church's apostolicity may express itself, we ask the question: Where and when does the church fulfill its missionary calling?

III. The Locus of The Church's Missionary Life

A. The Geographical Locus

Part of the answer to the question "where"? is implicit in all that we have said so far: there where the members of the church live, where they work, where they worship. But what about the commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel? The early church took this command seriously. The great pioneer in this field, the apostle Paul, saw in the church's world-mission the fulfilment of God's plan of universal redemption. We need not rehearse the causes which led to the blurring of the church's vision for world-evangelism in the post-Constantinian period until post-Reformation times. During the Protestant Reformation the Anabaptists had captured a vision for world-evangelism, but they were brutally suppressed. Later, in post-Reformation times there

were numerous renewal movements (e.g. Pietism, Methodism, etc.) which fostered a spirit of world-missions. This led to the formation of numerous mission societies through which the church carried out its world-mission by proxy. James Scherer complains that "since the time of Constantine, un-missionary churches and un-churchly missions have been the rule rather than the exception (*Missionary, Go Home!* p. 50). Although the missionary society is, scripturally, an abnormality, it has been a blessed abnormality in that it did what the church as a whole was neglecting to do.

We should not comfort ourselves with the thought that we now have denominational missionary boards and agencies through whom we carry out the great commission, and all that most of us have to do is to supply these agencies with money. The entire denomination should see itself as an agent of the good news in the world. And that raises the question of what it means to "go into all the world." The division of the world between Western Christendom and Eastern heathendom is gone. Moreover, the command to go into all the world applies to the younger churches in non-Western lands, from where the gospel came to them, just as much as to Western churches. Some of these younger churches do not have the financial strength to send missionaries to other countries and so must be content to carry out the great commission in their own land. "The ends of the earth" can no longer be defined geographically. "Distance alone no longer divides missions into home and foreign missions. The call to preach Christ where he has not yet been named remains, but the geographical situation may vary greatly (J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, p. 113). Both the younger churches of the East and the older churches of the West are called to carry out their mission "in all the world."

B. The Locus of Time

The command to preach the gospel in all the world carried with it the promise of Christ's presence until this age comes to an end. "To the ends of the earth" and "to the end of time" express the church's calling. The mission of the church is eschatological in

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nature. The return of Christ has always been a powerful incentive for evangelism. The charge that the blessed hope paralyzes mission efforts, because it focuses on the world to come, cannot be sustained. In one sense, the end has already come in Christ, and the presence of the Spirit is the assurance that the end has begun to break in. On the other hand, the end is delayed so that the church can carry out its mission. The imminence of the end makes missions more urgent, but it must never become a matter of anxiety, as if the end depended on our faithfulness in performing our task (A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*, p. 218). Human success in missions does not determine the time when the eternal kingdom will dawn. That we leave to God. But while it is day we must offer God's grace to all people, and this with the conviction that Christ has already triumphed and that we are participating in his victory even in the present age, as we carry out our mission both through success and through failure (Oscar Cullmann, "Eschatology and Missions in the New Testament," in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, edited by W. D. Davies and D. Daube, pp. 410ff.)

IV. Implications For Theological Education

In conclusion we should ask whether there are any implications in what we have said for missionary education. Historically, in Protestantism, missiology's first task was to prove, that missions was a legitimate venture on the part of the church. Theologians of missions were basically interested in undergirding "theologically" the phenomena of mission societies. They did the church a great service.

Today missiology is more concerned to show that the whole church is apostolic, and this means a grappling with the concept of the church. This raises the question of the place of missions departments in theological schools. These have at times been little more than the "overseas department" of theological schools--often accentuating the cleavage between church and missions. Gustav Warneck, a pioneer in missiology, doubted if missions could

properly be taught by established missions "chairs." He argued that they should be integrated into other theological disciplines. He himself taught missions swinging his Greek New Testament in his hand (G. Hoffmann, "Gedanken zum Problem der Integration von Kirche und Mission," in *EMZ*. IV (1968), p. 114). J. Glazik says something very similar: "Solange Mission in die allgemeine Theologie nicht integriert ist, solange wird Mission von Kirche unterschieden und nicht nur im Denken der Theologen ein Leben an der Peripherie fuhren, sondern auch im Bewusstsein der Glaebigen" ("Aufgabe und Ort der Missionswissenschaft," *EMZ*. III, (1968), p. 125).

Our concept of the church and its mission should be reflected in the way we teach missions in our theological schools. In the first place, missions must be taught as an integral part of practical theology--supported by other disciplines. Moreover, we must get away from the idea that mission has to do only with work in foreign countries; missions courses must represent our reflection on the work of the church "in all the world." Although it is imperative that there be a missions "expert" on a theological faculty, missions cannot be taught properly merely by appointing one or two such experts to the faculty. The whole faculty, in all its departments, must be engaged in the apostolic vocation of the church.

The schools themselves must be involved in ways in which the church is supposed to be involved. Schools can be just as introverted as the churches which they serve, especially if they are satisfied merely to train students to operate within existing patterns of church life. Somehow theological study and missions must be combined. Perhaps our major concern today ought to be to train teachers of the Word who have an understanding for the mission of the church and who will give themselves "to equip the saints for the work of the ministry." If our churches as a whole--those vast "frozen assets" of the church, as Hendricus Kraemer spoke of them--were to become more conscious of the church's mission in the world, we should not be lacking those who would be willing to share their means and their lives with people living in other lands who have not yet heard the gospel.

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(This paper was given in 1969 at the Consultation of Anabaptist Theology at Aspen, Colorado, attended by representatives from various Mennonite theological schools of North America.)

A Biblical Scholar Looks at Creation

Since the Genesis-record of creation has been something of a battleground in the past, many devout believers approach it somewhat apologetically. There is no need for this unease, for the Word of God is quite able to stand on its own feet. Our concern should be to listen to the message of the first chapters of Genesis, rather than attempting to defend their credibility. Just because the beginnings of the universe cannot be investigated with cameras, microscopes or test-tubes, does not mean that the creation account is less credible.

The concern of this paper, therefore, is not to question or to prove the truthfulness of the biblical record, but rather to suggest approaches which may help us to hear its message. This explains also the formulation of the topic, which sounds a bit presumptuous, particularly because my teaching field is primarily the New Testament. But let us begin with a few perspectives!

I. Perspectives For an Interpretation of The Creation Account

A. The Creation Account Is a Prelude to the History of Salvation

The Bible is a religious book and Genesis one is its first chapter. The creation account should then not be viewed as an attempt by a prescientific writer to explain the origin of the universe. Rather, the creation account should be seen as the starting point of sacred history. The creation story sets the stage for the unfolding of the divine purposes for humankind; it inaugurates the drama of redemption. The account of creation is one of the ten

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toledoth (histories) into which Genesis is divided, and that includes the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, patriarchs with whom God made a covenant and through whom God planned to bless the world.

Creation is in fact occasionally described as a salvatory work of God (e.g., Ps. 74:12ff.), and, vice versa, redemptive acts are called “creations.” “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not for I have redeemed you” (Isa. 43:1; cf. also Isa. 43:15, 21; 44:2, 24). B. W. Anderson writes, “The redemptive Word, by which Israel was created as the People of God, is none other than the creative Word by which the heavens were made. The point bears re-emphasis, that in the Bible creation is not an independent doctrine, but is secondary to Heilsgeschichte--the history in which God is the actor and redeemer” (“The Earth is the Lord’s,” *Interpretation* IX (1955), 3-20).

If interpreters of the creation account had kept this inseparable connection between creation and redemption more clearly in mind, they would have been less ready to make the account say what they wanted it to say about the origin of all things. One might say that the creation story represents only a few bold strokes of the Master-artist’s brush, to give us the framework for the picture of salvation. This can be seen quite readily from the distribution of the materials in the book of Genesis: of the 50 chapters, as we now have them, only 2 are devoted to creation. W. Eichrodt speaks of “die Schoepfung, als Ausgangspunkt einer Geschichte” (*Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 11/111, p. 62). And Derek Kidner suggests that we read “the tremendous acts of creation as a mere curtain-raiser to the drama that slowly unfolds throughout the length of the Bible. The Prologue is over in a page; there are a thousand to follow” (*Genesis*, p. 57).

B. *The God of Creation and the God of Revelation are the Same*

Once we have come to see that the God who is the Author of the “book of nature” is also the Author of “the book of revelation,”

we can investigate either of these “books” without fear. Of course we are fallible interpreters of both areas of investigation and can (if not careful) force these two “records” into an unnatural conflict.

It is not fair to the Genesis-record of creation to demand that it furnish minute and precise correspondence with the findings of the natural scientist. Science is cumulative, it changes; but this account is omnitemporal. Therefore, if at some stage science should appear to be in harmony with Genesis, the next stage could easily unreconcile the two again. Indeed, we can be happy that the Genesis story was not written in the categories of modern science, for then it would not have been understood by the millions of readers in the pre-scientific past and only be a select few in the present.

I am not suggesting that it is wrong to correlate the data of Scripture with those of nature. The discoveries of science have repeatedly prodded Bible interpreters to look afresh at the text of Genesis. It was Galileo’s telescope and not the church that refuted the Ptolmaic system.

Theologians should not array themselves needlessly against the findings of the scientist. On the other hand, scientists should not presume that their knowledge of the “book of nature” makes them authorities in the interpretation of the Genesis account. Science can tell us that the human being is a mammal, that devours, breeds and plunders. And so a chapter in a zoology textbook may be devoted to humans. But science cannot answer the deepest questions of human existence. These are answered only by divine revelation. Derek Kidner writes:

How the two pictures, biblical and scientific, are related to each other is not immediately clear, and one should allow for the provisional nature both of scientific estimates (without making this a refuge from all unwelcome ideas) and of traditional interpretations of Scripture. One must also recognize the different aims and styles of the two approaches: one probing the observable world, the other revealing chiefly the unobservable, the

relation of God to man. The style of reporting will be drily factual for the former, but the latter may need the whole range of literary genres to do it justice, and it is therefore important not to prejudge the method and intention of these chapters (*Genesis*, p. 26).

Once it is accepted that the God of creation and the God of revelation are the same God, there is no reason to panic when the book of nature and the book of revelation fail to present us with the kind of harmony that we may be looking for.

C. *The Language of the Creation Account Reflects the Cultural Milieu of Its Day*

As a preliminary observation it should be said that the creation account is given in “phenomenal” language, i.e., in the language of an observer. Or, to put it differently, it is given in “popular” rather than scientific language. When the Bible speaks of the “corners of the earth,” and the “setting of the sun,” or “the windows of heaven,” that is phenomenal, popular terminology. And it is precisely because this kind of language is used, rather than scientific jargon, that the account is meaningful for all ages and cultures.

In a sense we must read the account through the eyes of the original readers. That does not mean necessarily that they saw all the profound depths of the story, but it would not be wise to ascribe to the text meanings which would be in conflict with the original intent of the author.

Moreover, we should not be surprised to find that the Genesis creation story has many points of contact with other cosmologies of the ancient Near East. Perhaps the most outstanding piece of oriental cosmogony is the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma elish*. However, similarity of language or form does not mean similarity in meaning. There are vast differences between the biblical account of creation and the Babylonian, but the similarities in language should not disturb us.

If then we bring to the creation account a twentieth century scientific mindset, we may be asking the record to say things it never meant so say. If, on the other hand, we try to acquaint ourselves with the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East, and then take our stand with the biblical writer, who writes as a man of faith under the guidance of the Spirit, we shall be in a better position to understand the creation story. If I may quote Kidner once again:

The interests and methods of Scripture and science differ so widely that they are best studied, in any detail, apart. Their accounts of the world are as distinct (and each as legitimate) as an artist's portrait and an anatomist's diagram, of which no composite picture will be satisfactory for their common ground is only the total reality to which they both attend. It cannot be said too strongly that Scripture is the perfect vehicle for God's revelation, which is what concerns us here; and its bold selectiveness, like that of a great painting is its power. To read it with one eye on any other account is to blur its image and miss its wisdom (*Genesis*, p. 31).

D. The Time of Creation and the Age of This Earth Cannot Be Established From the Book of Genesis

When Bishop Ussher established the date of creation as 4004 B.C., he reflected the view which had been popular throughout the Middle Ages. And when an enterprising publisher put that date in the margin of one of the editions of the King James Version, it became almost as sacred as the biblical text itself.

But with the development of the natural sciences and the opening up of the ancient cultures of the Near East, questions about the date of creation surfaced once more. The Berkeley Version showed us how easily the pendulum can swing the other way among conservatives, for it informed its readers in a footnote of Genesis 1:1, that "billions of light-years are acceptable to devout Bible students."

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A quick review of several of the suggested solutions to the age of the earth, as posed by the sciences, would be in place:

1. The Rigid Chronology View. This view is still held by some believers on the assumption that the genealogies of Genesis allow us to compute the time of creation. Jewish chronologers paved the way for this view, which has been held from the beginning of the Christian era. Today, I believe, it is generally recognized that the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 serve as “time-bridges”, but that they do not lend themselves to mathematical calculations.

2. The Restitution Theory. This “interval” or “gap” theory seems to have arisen out of necessity when the evidence for the great antiquity of this earth became quite convincing. It holds that between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 some catastrophe of tremendous proportions brought about the ruin of God’s original creation, and that what we have in Genesis 1 is the story of the restitution of this world out of the chaotic state into which it had been thrown.

Aside from the shaky textual foundation for this theory, it seems a bit improbable that the original creation should be dismissed with a single sentence, and the re-creation be described in such detail. The great catastrophe which destroyed the original creation is then passed over with one sentence, while the lesser catastrophe (the deluge) is given later in 3 chapters. Moreover, even if one did accept the gap theory, one still has the problem of the sequence of the 6 days of creation to harmonize with the findings of the geologist (if that is one’s concern).

3. The Divine Day Theory. This is also called the “geological day theory,” and is designed to bring Scripture into harmony with the findings of paleontology. It takes the 6 days of creation to be eras rather than ordinary days.

There is no doubt that the Scriptures use the word *yom* (day) in different ways, although that does not seem to be the way the author of Genesis 1 pictures it. But even if we did take days in the sense of eras, many questions of geology, botany and biology still go begging.

4. The Flood Theory. When geologists first brought to light a world of vegetable and animal life which lay buried in the strata of

the earth, a simple answer given to these phenomena was that the Deluge, which was believed to have been universal in scope, was the explanation for these phenomena. According to this view one could even continue to hold to the rigid chronology view, for the age of the earth, in that case, need not be more than 6000 years. However, the geological and paleontological phenomena can hardly be explained by a single catastrophe, but seem to point to a plurality of temporally distributed forces.

5. The Pictorial Day Theory. In the creation record, according to this view, God is proclaiming that he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. In what other way, it is then asked, should God have communicated to humanity that which lies outside of the realm of human investigation and comprehension, but in a pictorial, visual and optical way? Genesis 1, then, would be a kind of "pictorial summary," a rough sketch of the great creative acts of God, suited to readers of every age.

There are various forms of this theory but they all have one point in common: that Genesis 1 speaks of things that lie beyond human comprehension and in figures of speech that people can understand. It is not the intent of the author of the creation account to give us an exact report of what happened at creation. He simply wants to impress his readers with the great truth: that everything that exists comes from the hand of God, is sustained by God, and is good. The account resembles a beautiful mural.

Perhaps this view could also be described as "historical aetiology." Aetiology ordinarily means, that the cause of something is inferred from what one sees at the present; an inference is made from the present situation to explain a past event. Pagan cosmologies would be forms of mythological aetiology. "Historical aetiology" would mean that we have a trustworthy account, given under the guidance of God, cast in symbolic and poetic categories. Much of the language is phenomenal and the story is told in terms of the work-week which ends with the sabbath.

I personally feel most comfortable with some form of this last view. The stages of creation as represented by the six days cannot, I think, be fitted neatly into the findings of modern science. That

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creation took place in an ordered sequence is thereby however not denied. As a matter of fact, the opposite is affirmed.

Let me conclude this point with the words of Carl F. Henry:

Today, fortunately, dogmatic insistence upon the gap theory of Genesis or a literal six-day creation, or the age theory or some other exclusive alternative, is not requisite to a reverent regard for the creation narrative. Alert to large gaps in the biblical revelation, evangelical theology marshals the data of Scripture primarily for its special relevance to redemption rather than to answer all the questions of concern to history and to science. There are many biblical gaps--gaps in history, gaps in geology, as well as gaps in the creation story: whoever ventures to prepare an exhaustive index to the events of history or to the behavior of nature exclusively from the Bible undertakes the impossible (*Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, p. 58).

II. The Biblical Record of The Creation of The Cosmos

A. The Creation of the World in General

1. The Prologue (1:1,2)

a. An Unargued Cause (*Elohim*). The word "God" dominates this entire chapter. It is used some 35 times in as many verses. No attempt is made to prove his existence. Boldly the writer confesses that God stands at the beginning of all things. In pagan mythology, where the gods create the world, we are always left asking: who made the gods? and the genealogical list gets longer and longer. But not here, where a God who is sovereign and not subject to any cosmic power, is in complete control.

By putting Elohim at the beginning of the record, the author sets him apart from all that is created and so confesses the transcendence of God. Implied also is the fact that everything that

exists is dependent on God and that God alone gives meaning to everything that exists. It would appear to me that as long as we leave God where the Genesis author puts him ("in the beginning"), many of the problems raised by modern science are greatly minimized.

b. An Undefined Era (*bereshith*). "In the beginning God!" It is gratuitous to ask when this beginning was, but it is important to remember that there was a beginning, and that God was before this beginning. In the religion of some ancient peoples chaos stands at the beginning of things, unfashioned matter. The world arises out of chaos because in it are seeds, or an egg, or a bud (W. Foerster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* III, 1003). And in contrast to cyclic views of history the Bible informs us that there was a beginning and there will be an end. Bernard Anderson suggests that to say "in the beginning" corresponds to the prophetic expectation "in the end" (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 1, 730). God is the lord of time, and history therefore has meaning; it's going somewhere and God knows the end from the beginning.

c. An Inexplicable Reality ("created the heavens and the earth"). Although the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was first formally asserted by Theophilus of Antioch, our author has it here in a nutshell. And while the verb *bara'* (create) by itself may not prove creation out of nothing, in Genesis 1:1 that seems to be what is meant. Some Oriental cosmogonies view creation as a struggle between opposing forces or gods, but the biblical faith affirms that the universe comes from the hand of God.

The inexplicable reality is "the heavens and the earth." The Old Testament does not have a word for universe, like the Greek *kosmos*, but it speaks of "the heavens and the earth," or simply of "the all" (*ha-kol*). Quite obviously, however, the center of the universe for the writer of Genesis is the earth; and so the account of creation is geocentric in orientation. He is interested primarily in this sphere because it is here where human beings live and fall into sin and are to be redeemed.

d. An Undefined Constitution (v. 2a). This is expressed, first of all, by *tohuwabohu*, which may be a hendiadys for "formless

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waste.” If taken separately, *tohu* suggests that the world had not yet been given form, and *bohu*, that it was still empty. The words seem to point in the direction in which creation will move: God will form the world and then fill it.

Another way in which this undefined constitution is described is: “Darkness was upon the face of the deep.” “Darkness” and “deep” are common terms in oriental cosmogenies, as is *mayim* (waters). The similarity of words, however, does not put the biblical account in the same category. The contrast is very marked. Here there is no conflict between God and chaos or darkness or waters. God is in complete control. For the person of faith this absolute lordship of God over chaos is the assurance that the Creator’s power will keep this universe from returning to primeval chaos. Moment by moment the universe is supported solely by the will of the Creator.

e. An Unlimited Power (v. 2b). “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” *Ruach* (Spirit) can also mean “wind” or “breath.” For that reason some translations prefer to speak of the “wind from God” or a “mighty wind” sweeping over the face of the waters. But regardless of how we render *ruach* in English, it is God at work in great power and majesty. And while the waters are frequently seen as God’s enemies by biblical writers, always God’s lordship over the sea is acknowledged. At the end of time, when all enemies have been put down, then even the sea will be no more (Rev. 21:1). Our text, however, does not suggest a struggle between God and malignant forces. Over the deep, over what is waste and void, over the waters, his Spirit moves creatively according to his holy purposes. Nothing can turn him aside or hinder him.

2. The Hexameron (vv. 3-25).

a. Creation By the Word of God. “And God said ... and it was so.” That is the constant refrain which punctuates the drama of creation. Creation by the word expresses the free and spontaneous initiation by God, his sovereignty. God’s word is not merely a

sound or an idea, but it is an act, an event, a command which accomplishes something. "God's freedom in the creation of the world is the primary message in passages where God is said to create 'by the word'," says Paul Heinisch (*Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 149). While creation by the word is found also in oriental cosmogonies, the emphasis there is on the magic word, the correct formula. In the biblical account the word of God is the expression of his will. The universe is not self-existent, or struggled for, or random, or a divine emanation, but it emerges by divine *fiat*.

b. The Creative Acts of God. By eight creative acts the universe is fashioned in six days. The first three days are devoted to the work of separation (light and darkness; upper and lower waters; water from land), and the second triad tells us how God filled and adorned these realms. Perhaps it could be said that the first three days do away with *tohu* (formlessness) and the second triad with *bohu* (emptiness). Moreover, the days of the first triad correspond to the days of the second.

Those who wish to find correspondences between this record and modern scientific findings should be reminded that this is not the concern of the writer. He reports the creation of light before that of the sun, moon, and stars; for man's enjoyment of light is not dependent on the heavenly bodies, but on God. (There is no need of sun or moon in the new Jerusalem, Rev. 21:23.) Moreover, in a day when people's lives were determined by the planets, when the world was enslaved to astrology, the biblical writer knew what he was saying when he put "light" before "lights." He does not even name the sun, moon or stars, for they are not to be worshiped. Sun, moon and stars are merely cosmic stewards, trustees of light. They rule night and day as lightbearers, not as powers. And when God gave a name to darkness (calling it "night") the writer wanted to stress that God is the sovereign ruler over all realms.

By creating the firmament God assures us of the stability of the created order. (*Raqia* means "firmly hammered, stamped"; in Greek it is *stereoma*, in Latin, *firmamentum*.) God keeps the universe from reverting back into chaos. This is quite different from oriental cosmogonies where creation is frequently viewed in terms of a

primordial battle between divine powers, and man then must perform certain rites to repeat the mythological drama in order to be sure of the status quo of the universe. But in the Bible the world is created by divine *fiat* and humanity can therefore live without fear.

That plants should be created before the sun presents no problem to our writer, since for him the sun is a dispensable instrument in the hand of God. That the plants should appear before human beings are made is a reminder to us of God's loving care. He prepared for our needs even before we were made. And whereas in the ancient fertility rites human beings try to gain control over nature in order to secure their existence, our writer assures us that God has put fertility into the earth; has put the ability to reproduce into herbs and trees.

That plants and creatures produce "after their kind," would suggest that there are divinely graded levels of life. While stories of primeval antiquity current among other nations mention mixed beings, demi-creatures and hybrids, our account witnesses to the great truth, that the God of creation is a God of order. Kidner makes the observation, that "it is part of godliness to respect the limitations within which we live as natural creatures, as from him" (*Genesis*, p. 48). Fertility, so often deified in the ancient world, is clearly a "created" capacity according to our text.

First to be populated with "living creatures" are those regions which are distant and strange to human beings. "Where man thinks he sees the open jaws of death, precisely there, God causes animals to swarm and fly," says Karl Barth (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* 111/1, 189). And whereas the sea monsters are usually viewed as humanity's great enemies, here it is stated that God created also the *tanninim* (sea monsters). That animals should be designated as "souls of life" (1:24), just as man is (2:7), should not surprise us, for both humans and animals depend on God for their life.

c. The Hebrew *Weltbild*. Quite naturally the biblical writers describe the universe in terms of three storeys. The earth is like a saucer surrounded by water and resting on water (or pillars sunk in the waters of the deep). Above the earth and its surrounding sea is

the vault of the firmament which also rests on pillars (in this case upon the mountains at the rim of the earth). Above the firmament is more water; the firmament has doors and windows which open when it rains. Above the heavenly ocean God dwells as in a balcony. The underworld is located in the depths of the sea, the deepest part of the earth.

Surely such cosmology cannot be written off as outmoded. It is a meaningful description of an observer who lives in a prescientific age, and is given in categories that continue to communicate meaningfully to readers of all ages.

B. The Biblical Account of the Creation of Man

The record of the creation of man is invested with a special dignity. Unlike the animals who are bound only to this earth, man is a being who lives before his Maker. And since the burden of Genesis is the redemption of the human race, the author leaves the rest of creation quickly behind and man takes centre stage. In chapter 1 creation moves up to man; his creation is the crown of creation in general. In chapter 2 redemption history moves out from man and so we have an elaboration of man's creation.

1. Man, the Crown of Creation (1:26-31).

a. His Divine Origin (vv. 26a,27). "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." How majestic and personal is the "let us"! Quite a contrast to "let the earth bring forth." "Man" is used generically in our text. Humanity is, however, "bi-sexual": "male and female he created them." The two terms "image" and "likeness" appear to be used synonymously.

This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of what the *imago dei* means, but von Rad warns us against those interpretations which limit God's image to man's spiritual nature. He says, "The marvel of man's bodily appearance is not at all to be excepted from the realm of God's image. . . . Therefore, one will do

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well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole man is created in God's image" (*Genesis*, p. 13). D. F. Payne, in *Genesis One Reconsidered* (p. 24), takes issue with him, by pointing out that both male and female were made in God's image and so it could not refer to bodily form, since the form of the body of male and female is different. But I think that kind of caveat misses the point von Rad is making.

While man is like animals biologically, he is different in that he is responsible before God, he can respond to his word, he can choose to obey (or to disobey), he can love and give himself to God. After the Fall, man is still in God's image (Gen. 9:6). That man rebelled against God and that his fellowship with God needs to be renewed is, of course, obvious from Scripture as a whole. Because man abused his God-given freedom and disobeyed God, the focus of the Bible's attention is not on his nobility, but on his problem: that of sin. Nevertheless, his dignity should not be overlooked, for there are no human beings who are not in the image of God.

b. His Exalted Position (v. 26a). To be in the image of God means, among other things, to be God's representative here on earth, and so man is endowed with a special task. He is given dominion over other creatures. "Yet you have made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:5,6). The whales and the squirrels get no command from God. But man is given the solemn obligation to develop God's creation. This means that we should have a healthy appreciation for human discoveries--if only the demonic in man did not constantly turn what might be a blessing for humankind into degradation and destruction.

c. His Earthly Purpose (v. 28). The power of procreation is given to man together with a special blessing: "And God blessed them and said: be fruitful and multiply." To participate with God, as it were, in the "creation" of offspring is indeed a high calling. In the light of the population explosion in some countries some have

wondered whether this command still applies. To this it may possibly be said, that we have in Genesis a "colonist's charter."

The expressions describing man's lordship over creation are strong: *kabash*, "to trample on," *radha*, "to tread." Man has been set in the world to enforce God's claims as Lord. The attainments of civilization are not in themselves contrary to God's will; they are a form of taking possession of the earth by the royal human race. It is in the divine mandate to subdue the earth that human labor is given its true dignity. To harness the forces of nature, as we say, is in keeping with man's high calling, as long as these cultural pursuits do not dishonor the Creator and bring a curse upon creation. We will have to admit that much of what man has created (e.g., destructive weaponry) hardly bears the Creator's autograph. When God-given natural resources are recklessly ruined to satisfy man's greed, man can hardly claim to be a good steward of the earth.

Man, however, does not fulfill his purpose here on earth simply by endless labor. Genesis 2:1-4 is a reminder to us that we must also have sacred times and places if we are to fulfill our earthly calling. Helmut Thielicke writes so penetratingly:

'Subdue the earth' does not mean: 'Create a rich productive culture, create social perfection, transform unruly nature with your technology into the dwelling of civilization, conquer the assaults of nature, drive out the cold of winter, illuminate the nights, criss-cross the oceans, reach for the stars.' 'Subdue the earth' means this instead: 'When you put your stamp upon creation, see to it that your human life and your culture do not become a sign of your eternal restlessness and your blind titanism, but rather a thanksgiving and a response to him who gave you this earth Otherwise your gift of dominion over the earth will trickle away in your hands. You will become the harried slave of your works. Your unrest and greed will consume you, until, instead of subduing the earth, you make a hell of it' (*How the World Began*, p. 110f.).

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d. His Adequate Provision (vv. 29,30). The main emphasis of these verses seems to be on the fact that God cares for all his creatures, and that all life directly or indirectly depends on vegetation. The world before the fall and the world as it came under the curse of sin are separated from each other by a deep gulf. What is now a universal law of nature, namely, that one creature preys on the other, may not have been a primary law of nature, but may in fact have been determined in some way by man's Fall into sin. The prophets in their descriptions of the new order in the age to come, describe it in terms of a return to paradisaical conditions, even in the animal kingdom.

2. An Elaboration of Man's Creation (2:7,18-25).

a. The Earthly Lump (2:7a). God formed man "dust from the ground." *Yatzar* (form) is of course anthropomorphic language, designed to stress the fact that man, God's special creation, belongs physically to this earth. That God "formed" man is a way of saying that the Creator is concerned, interested, and has a special design for man. Also, it underscores that God is man's Lord.

Although the notion of pre-existent stuff lurks in the background, it plays no meaningful role in the biblical account of man's creation. This "matter" (dust of the ground) is not alive, charged with divine forces (as in paganism); it neither opposes nor participates in creation.

b. The Divine Infusion (2:7b). By breathing into man the breath of life, man becomes a *nephesh chayyah* (soul of life, living soul). While it is true that animals are similarly described (1:24), the manner in which man is created (although very anthropomorphic in description) puts a deep gulf between man and the animals. God "breathed into man." How warmly personal that was! An act of self-giving with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss! Whereas in pagan cosmogenies creation may be depicted as a sexual process, or as proceeding from the seed of the god, his blood, spittle, tears, or life, the biblical record does not allow for such material emanation of man from the deity. And since there is no natural bridge between

man and God, there is no apotheosis in the Hebrew faith; man cannot become divine, as in paganism. Man is part of creation as a whole; he shares the sixth day with other creatures; he is made of dust as they are; but the stress falls on his uniqueness.

c. The Human Companion (2:18-24). Eve too was created with Adam in the image of God, but special attention is given to her creation, in order to prepare us for the important role she will play in chapter 3. Not only will she lead Adam into sin, but she will be the instrument through which the Redeemer of lost humankind will come.

The setting for the creation of Eve is Adam's failure to find a companion in the animal world. (Initially the woman is presented to the man as a companion, and not yet as childbearer.) There was no counterpart to Adam in the animal world, and so God makes woman.

The construction of Eve is probably the most anthropomorphic part of the creation account. God "built" (*banah*) the woman with something he took from Adam. This is a parabolic way of indicating the deep and mysterious unity of husband and wife. And the fact that it really is a mystery is indicated by the text in its reference to the fact that God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. How it is that two people are created for each other is a mystery that can be spoken of only in parabolic language "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

A woman's place is at the side of the man; to be his companion, his fitting 'help', the sharer in all his life... To grasp at 'equality' with everyone and everything is, from the biblical point of view, the 'sin of Adam', i.e., pride. In an age in which everyone grasps at equality and no one is willing to take the form of a servant, the biblical teaching is bound to give offence. But we must insist that false and sentimental notions of the equality of the sexes do not exalt but dishonour womanhood, which has its own distinctive excellence--an excellence that is different from man's (Alan Richardson, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 68f.).

d. Man's Song (v. 23). Adam recognized immediately that Eve was intimately related to him (something he did not find in the animal world), and he broke out in song: "This at last . . . this one shall be called *ishsha* (woman) because from *ish* (man) is this one." The word for woman (assonant with the word "man") suggests that Adam saw in Eve his alter ego, his other self. And this is not the last time that the sight of the "beloved" has inspired poetry.

e. The Writer's Observation (2:24,25). When the author of Genesis wrote these words, it had already been sufficiently demonstrated that a man would leave father and mother and cleave to his wife. And notice that the "leaving" (i.e., the decision to marry) comes before the "cleaving" (i.e., sexual union).

Verse 25, with its seemingly casual comment on the nakedness of Adam and Eve, stresses the innocence of man before the fall. Unembarrassed they stand before each other and before God with perfect ease and perfect love. The moment they disobeyed God's command, they lost this innocence, felt ashamed and tried to cover up; and God, by making clothes for them, made it clear that clothes will be necessary for a fallen race to keep from become completely degraded.

III. Theological Implications of The Creation Record

The theological implications of the biblical account of creation are too numerous to mention here (and we have already suggested a number of them as we went along), but it may be of some value if we lift up a few of the more basic teachings of our passage for observation.

A. The Transcendence of God

Throughout the record the distance between God and his creation is reverently stressed. God is not part of this cosmos. The world did not emanate from God by a natural process; it is not identical with him in its essence (as in Pantheism). He existed prior

to this world. All nature worship is ruled out; God alone must be worshiped.

In paganism the gods originate in the "world stuff" and so there is no fixed boundary between them and the world of humanity and other creatures. Thus we find no clear-cut distinction between the worship of nature and the worship of the gods of nature. But in the biblical account the gulf between God and his creation is clearly marked out.

B. The Sovereignty and Lordship of the Creator

He who gives the name to a person or thing is the lord over it. And that is what our account suggests, when it speaks of God giving names to the light and the darkness, and other things. Also, he who sets the boundaries of sea and land is the lord over chaos. God is almighty and omniscient. He creates and sustains the universe without effort. All polytheism is ruled out; there is only one God, and he is sovereign over this cosmos.

The regularities of nature are not simply an expression of "natural law" in the thinking of the biblical writer, but of the sustaining power of God. In pagan theogenies the gods are part of the processes of time. The biblical God, however, is outside the flux of becoming or of change; he controls times and sets seasons. To say that God made the earth means that all belongs to him and this calls for adoration, trust and obedience.

C. Every Creature Has a Place in God's Plan

By assigning a specific role to every creature, by calling each creature by name, God assures us that we have a place in this universe. Every creature, the heavenly bodies included, is God's servant, carries out a God-given function. This is particularly true of man, who is given a special dignity. Life for the person who acknowledges God's lordship is then not a senseless merry-go-round, but a participation in the great purposes of God. The

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creation story stands as a bulwark against that nihilism which would rob all life of its meaning and purpose.

D. "He Has Done All Things Well."

Repeatedly our author confesses that what God did was good, and finally, in 1:31 he exclaims, that it was to *tob meod* (very good). In dualistic cosmogenies the world is bad, but in the Bible it is good. Perhaps *tob* is used more in a teleological sense than in the aesthetic, but certainly the biblical writers also had an eye for the beauty of God's handiwork. When the hearts of human beings rebel against God and become hardened by sin, they also lose the capacity to see the true beauty and wonder of God's creation. It may be, too, that the word *tob* expresses the Creator's satisfaction with his creation.

When we come to Genesis 3, creation comes under a curse, Between the creation story and chapter 3 hangs an iron curtain, and in "the music of the spheres" we now hear also "the groaning of creation." It is when we get to chapter 3 that we begin to sense more keenly that the creation story was but the prelude to what now follows: redemption history.

E. The Doctrine of Divine Providence.

The creation narrative teaches us that all creatures are completely dependent on God, and that God graciously sustains them and cares for them. Perhaps the words of Helmut Thielicke say it better than mine, and I close with his observations:

The hand that beckoned the stars and the flowers at the world's dawning and made the day and the night, has also fashioned my life and guides it. If he knows that the plants need rain and animals need food, he will also know the needs of the Queen of England, the orphan in the children's home, the aged pensioner. If a thousand years are as yesterday, then the tiny stretches of my daily

journey, for which I ask his blessing, are just as important as the light years that measure the reaches of cosmic space (*How the World Began*, p. 19).

(This paper was given at the meeting of the west coast chapter of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1976 in Los Angeles.)

A Christian Approach to Homosexuality

Before we begin to reflect on what the Scriptures have to say on the subject of homosexuality (*homo* means “the same” and so includes lesbianism), we should make a few important distinctions. First, we must distinguish between what people “are,” and what these people “do.” In this paper the focus will be on homosexual activity rather than on homosexual leanings or tendencies. Second, I am not in the position to judge whether homosexual leanings have some kind of physical base, or whether they are the result of socio-psychological factors. Experts in this area of research are not agreed. And so, with Professor Smedes, of Fuller Theological Seminary, I would say, that “since we cannot pinpoint the exact measure of responsibility people have for sexual distortions, we do best to leave the precise moral scorekeeping with God” (*Sex for Christians*, p. 41).

Most of us would agree, I should think, that few people deliberately become homosexuals. “No homosexual, to my knowledge, ever decides to be homosexual; he only makes the painful discovery at one time or another that he is homosexual” (Smedes, *Ibid.* p. 70).

It should, however, not be overlooked that all of us are sinners. There is no part of our being that is untainted by sin, and that includes our sexuality. Moreover, as we shall see later, a homosexual orientation falls short of the Creator’s ideal. Therefore, to say that a homosexual orientation is an expression of the God-intended variety of his creation provokes most Bible readers to stupefaction and outrage. Nevertheless, all of us, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, stand under the judgment of God and are deeply in need of his grace in the matter of our sexuality.

Because the biblical writers do not distinguish between a person's sexual leanings and his or her sexual practices, the church has at times dealt rather harshly with people who apparently could not help but feel attracted to the same sex. To this writer it seems clear from his study of the biblical evidence that homosexual activity is condemned by the biblical writers. The matter of "constitutional" homosexuality, however, is passed over in silence in the Bible; at least it is not directly addressed.

If then we had to deal only with the matter of homosexual activity, the subject would be considerably less complex. Today, however, we are asked not only to make a distinction between a person's sexual constitution and his or her sexual activity, but also between casual homosexual acts and those which (it is claimed) are signs of genuine human love between two people of the same sex, similar to heterosexual relations. A permanent homosexual partnership, it is argued, is just as Christian as a heterosexual marriage. Many practicing homosexuals condemn promiscuous sex, rape and the corruption of children of the same sex just as severely as do heterosexuals. They insist, however, that a tender, faithful homosexual relationship should be viewed as an alternate Christian life-style.

What do we say to (a) the matter of homosexual orientation, (b) the question of homosexual practices, and (c) the claim that a permanent, loving homosexual relationship is a viable option for Christians? Let us begin with the biblical texts that mention homosexuality.

I. Reflections on The Relevant Biblical Texts

A. The Sodomites (Gen. 19:1-13)

That Sodom goes down in history as the epitome of wickedness is beyond dispute. The Genesis writer makes this judgment: "The men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly before the Lord" (13:13). The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was so great that God determined to investigate

(18:20,21). In the end God visited these wicked cities with an awful judgment (19:25). But the question is: What specifically was the sin (or sins) of Sodom that called forth such a frightful punishment from the “judge of all the earth” (18:25)?

After the two heavenly visitors were received by Lot, the men of Sodom demanded that he allow them “to know” the visitors whom Lot entertained. Lot found this violent attempt to have sexual relations with the visiting men so monstrous that he was willing to jeopardize the honor and safety of his daughters in his effort to shield the visitors (and himself) from the enraged townsmen. (This seamy incident has given us the word “sodomy”.) Lot was finally rescued by the messengers sent by God, but the city was destroyed by fire and brimstone.

Since the publication of D. S. Bailey’s book, *Homosexuality and the Western Tradition*, there have been numerous attempts at reconstructing this story. Bailey argues that the sin of the men of Sodom was not homosexuality but inhospitality. The men of Sodom who demanded “to know” Lot’s male guests were not bent on homosexual assault, rather, they wanted to interrogate the strangers who had entered the city. Since Lot himself was a stranger among them, they wanted to examine the credentials of these “foreigners.”

No one will deny that the men of Sodom violated the laws of hospitality, so sacred in the Near East, but certainly the desire to “know” the visitors was not an innocent desire to get to know them better or even to examine their credentials. Lot knew Sodom well enough that he advised his visitors not to spend the night on the streets (as they had initially planned), but to come under the shelter of his roof and so to escape molestation. Moreover, had it not been the desire of his fellow townsmen to have sexual relations with the visitors, Lot would not have offered them his daughters. It would appear rather grotesque to meet the demand to know the visitors’ credentials by an offer of his daughters. And the pious suggestion that Lot was seeking to wean the Sodomites away from homosexuality and to restore proper male-female relations by giving his daughters into their hands, taxes our imagination too severely.

Besides, when Lot offered his daughters so that they might “know” them, surely Lot was not suggesting that they merely become better acquainted with them in a casual, social sense. If the word “to know” means sexual relations in verse 8 (i.e., Lot’s daughters), then it more than likely means the same in verse 5 (i.e., the visiting males). The argument that the word “to know” is used relatively rarely for sexual intercourse in the Old Testament carries little weight. The context must always determine the meaning of a word. And to argue that the sin of the Sodomites was homosexual rape and that, therefore, the passage cannot be used to condemn loving homosexual relationships, is to demand too much from this story. One should not expect a full-orbed discussion of homosexuality in a passage that deals with the sexual advances of these wicked Sodomites. It should be noted, however, that homosexuality was not the only sin of Sodom. And to say that Sodom was judged simply because of its homosexuality, would be pushing the envelope, as we say. Ezekiel lists “pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me” (Ezek. 16:49,50). In 2 Peter 2:7 homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned; only that the wicked inhabitants of Sodom lived licentiously. In Jude 7, however, the writer is more explicit: “Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust. . . .” Those who take the New Testament seriously cannot dismiss Jude’s condemnatory words simply as an error copied from Jewish pseudepigrapha (which condemn the sin of homosexuality very sharply). To be sure, the sin of homosexuality was not the only sin the Sodomites were guilty of, but to argue that the Genesis text has nothing to do with homosexual activity sounds like special pleading. But having said that, it should not be inferred that Sodom was destroyed for this gross evil in particular. Pride and the mistreatment of the poor are also grievous sins before the Lord.

B. The Levitical Texts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13)

In Leviticus 18:22 we read: “You shall not lie with a male as

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with a woman; it is an abomination.” And in 20:13 the penalty for such an outrage is given: “if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

Since the word “abomination” is used also for idolatry it has been suggested that cult prostitution is condemned here rather than homosexuality. But that seems to fly in the face of what seems to be the obvious meaning of the text. Even Bailey, who argues strongly against the traditional aversion of Christians to homosexual practices, admits that these passages cannot mean anything other than homosexual acts between men and not ritual or other acts performed in the name of religion. But not all agree with Bailey. Some argue that these texts prohibit religious practices which have long since ceased and therefore have nothing to say about homosexual partnerships today. Still others hold that the references in Leviticus are to sacred prostitution, so common in Canaanite fertility cults. Both male and female cult prostitutes are condemned by the prophets, but Leviticus 18 and 20 condemns the evil of “male lying with male.”

Others have argued that the Leviticus texts cannot be carried over to the life of the Christian believer. Clearly some of the regulations laid down in Leviticus had redemptive-historical significance, but passed away in the light of God’s fuller revelation in Christ. Mark Olson, writing in *The Other Side*, argues rather stridently, but far too superficially, that “for the followers of Jesus, the levitical code is no longer applicable in any literal sense” (April 1984, p. 25). These rules and regulations, he insists, no longer reflect God’s will for us in any absolute, ongoing sense. He ends his argument by saying that these two verses that condemn homosexual relations shed little or no light on what God wants for us today. That, of course, is true of the Jewish sacrificial system, purification rites, dietary laws, festivals, and many other practices. But when we come to the moral laws of the Old Testament, we cannot simply relegate them to a past era.

Granted, it is not always easy to distinguish between moral laws which have permanent validity and prohibitions of cultic or other

practices which are time and culture bound. But these levitical texts must not be seen as isolated dictums. They are, as Bennit Sims puts it, "part of the even tapestry of the Word of God--threads and patterns in a larger picture. . . In the Old Testament heterosexual sex is clearly and repeatedly affirmed as God's will for humanity. Homosexual love, however lofty, is never explicitly approved. Indeed, wherever homosexuality is named it is condemned" ("Sex and Homosexuality," in *Christianity Today*, Feb. 1978, p. 24). Nor can we escape the boundaries set by God on sexual activities in the Old Testament by the shaky argument that we are no longer under law but under grace. One should think that it would be obvious that even if dietary laws are found in the same chapter together with proscriptions of adultery, incest and bestiality, that these are not of the same order. Even ancient Israel knew the difference in the gravity of sin between eating pork and committing murder. If both are forbidden in the same book, does that mean that they are in the same category?

Editorializing on Leviticus 18:22, Kenneth Kantzer comments,

The view that this passage condemns only rape or sex without love will not wash. The point of the passage is that sex in a marriage between different sexes is approved, but identical sexual relations between those of the same sex are condemned. Neither can we set aside this passage as irrelevant for us today. The prohibition against homosexual practice stands in the immediate context that condemns adultery, bestiality and child sacrifice (*Christianity Today*, Feb. 1978, p. 9).

In similar vein Richard Lovelace writes: "Unless modern readers are prepared to say that most of the acts from Lev. 20 . . . could be right for today, their argument for the exemption of homosexuality is weak" (*Homosexuality and the Church*, p. 88).

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C. The Gibeah Story (Judges 19:22-30)

The men of Gibeah appear at the door of an old man who (like Lot) was sojourning among them, and ask that he give to them his levitical visitor, whom he had received into his house for the night, so that they might “know” him (v. 22). Like Lot, he refused, but unfortunately, he had no angels to thwart the vile intentions of the townsmen as did Lot. He therefore offered them the visiting Levite’s concubine and his own virgin daughter, rather than give up his guest. His suggestions, however, fell on deaf ears and so the Levite himself (perhaps to save his own skin) took his concubine by force and thrust her out to the men. They then abused her sexually all night and in the morning she was dead.

True, the sin of the Gibeonites was that of rape and murder, but their intention was to have homosexual relations with the Levite who had come to town. When it is argued that the text says nothing about a loving homosexual relationship it needs to be pointed out that the townsmen in our story did not, it seems, anticipate any resistance to their amorous approaches from the visiting Levite. Their intention was not to rape the male visitor, but to have sexual relations with him.

To say that the men of Gibeah were not homosexually inclined, as can be seen from their rape of the Levite’s female concubine, is to overlook the fact that even among married men, who have fathered children, there are those who engage also in homosexual activity.

Admittedly the sin of the Gibeonites was not limited to their desire for homosexual relations with the male visitors. They, like the Sodomites, sinned grievously against the sacred duty of hospitality, not to mention the sin of rape and murder. But to infer that this story does not condemn homosexual activity as “wicked and vile” (v. 23), is to close one’s eyes to the facts.

D. The Pauline Passages

Mark Olson, in an article entitled “Untangling the Web” makes

much of the fact that Jesus never spoke on the subject of homosexuality (*The Other Side*. April 1984, p. 25). True, there is nothing in the Gospels on this subject, just as there is nothing on many other topics on which we wish we had a clear word of Jesus. It should, however, not be overlooked that Jesus spoke very clearly about marriage. He affirmed heterosexual marriage as God's original and enduring will for men and women. Moreover, it would be precarious to drive a wedge between Jesus and Paul by arguing that since Jesus said nothing on this subject, the Pauline texts need not be taken seriously. Let us then take a look at these passages:

1. Romans 1:26,27. "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."

What are unnatural relations? On the physical level homosexual relations may be viewed as unnatural in that the male and female genitalia are complementary, and therefore heterosexual relations are natural. To see in the exchange of natural relations for unnatural ones a reference to variations in coital position or method is a view that hardly deserves mention. Thomas Aquinas thought homosexual relations were unnatural because they did not lead to procreation. But we know that procreation is not the only purpose of sexual relations (see I Cor. 7:1ff.). What is natural, so the argument goes today very often, depends on a person's sexual orientation. For a homosexual male to have sexual relations with a female or for a heterosexual male to have sexual relations with another male, would be contrary to nature. Pittinger thinks it is outrageous to ask anyone to deny himself what to him is a normal and natural mode of sexual expression (*Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, p. 87). Rather condescendingly he observes that Paul did not know the kind of homosexuality which was such a beautiful aspect of earlier Greek life.

There are other ways of avoiding Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity. It is sometimes said that Paul borrowed the language about homosexual relations and so we should not take this "hackneyed" catalogue of pagan vices too seriously. But could Paul not, one might ask, have drawn this judgment on homosexual practices from his Bible, the Old Testament, on which he constantly leaned in his writings? We cannot deny that Paul used the language of his day, but if we cannot take him seriously when he speaks of pagan vices, can we take him seriously elsewhere?

Nor is it helpful to understand our passage as a condemnation of the sin of dishonoring God, rather than a censure of homosexuality, or to argue that when homosexuality is set in the context of love for God and for one another the activity escapes the condemnation of Romans 1. But Sims is probably right in suggesting, "The logical effect of the exemption argument is to suggest that, given the proper motivation, there are loving ways to be full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity . . . (Rom. 1:29ff.)" (*Christianity Today* Feb. 1978, p. 93).

Another reading of our passage suggests that Paul has idolatrous homosexuality in mind and not a Christian believer who, it is argued, is free to follow his or her orientation. But, we must say in response, the disorders mentioned in Romans 1 are not wrong because they issue from idolatry; they are wrong in and of themselves (Richard Lovelace, *op cit.*, p. 93).

In his book, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, Robin Scroggs argues that Paul has primarily pederasty in mind, since that was, Scroggs argues, the only form of male homosexual behavior openly and widely practiced in the Hellenistic world at that time. That pederasty was a widespread plague in the ancient world is well known. But to argue that Paul condemns only pederasty (i.e., a man having sexual relations with young boys) and not the sexual intercourse of consenting adult males, will hardly do.

The honorableness of the heterosexual act is implied when Paul describes the homosexual vice (v. 27) as "leaving the natural use of the woman." There is a natural order that is good and God-given and there is a rejection of that order in homosexual activity. (That

is not to say, of course, that all heterosexual activity is acceptable to God, for adultery, fornication and the like, are also condemned by the Scriptures.)

Paul describes the desire of men for sexual relations with males as insatiable lust. But to argue that Paul condemns only the lust and the promiscuity and not homosexual relations per se, does not ring true. Jesus does condemn looking at a woman "to lust after her" (Mt. 5:27-32), but that is not a condemnation of sexual desire in a marriage relationship which has been legitimized by God (I Cor. 7:1-5). Surely Paul is condemning more than lust and promiscuity; he is condemning homosexual practices, including lesbianism. If loving, homosexual relations had any chance of standing approved before God, Paul presumably would have said so. But he closes the door on homosexual activity.

2. I Corinthians 6:9,10 and I Timothy 1:9,10. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 6:9,10). "The law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching" (I Tim. 1:9,10). In the first edition of the RSV the two words used in I Corinthians 6:10 for homosexual activity were combined into one and translated simply as "homosexuals." The 1973 edition changed "homosexuals" to "sexual perverts" (still combining the two words, but evidently shielding those who have a homosexual orientation). The NRSV has translated both Greek words for homosexual activity: "male prostitutes, sodomites." The first word which Paul uses here means "soft," and describes catamites (men and boys who allow themselves to be used in sexual relations, i.e., playing a passive role). The second word, translated "sodomites" in both I Corinthians and I Timothy by the NRSV,

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means, literally, to lie with a male, and describes the more active role of the one engaging in homosexual acts.

Again there have been attempts to explain these passages as a condemnation of excesses in sexual behavior, of pederasty, or male prostitution, but not necessarily of permanent homosexual relations. "The Bible clearly condemns certain kinds of homosexual practices (...gang rape, idolatry, and lustful promiscuity). However, it appears to be silent on certain other aspects of homosexuality--both the 'homosexual orientation' and 'a committed love-relationship analogous to heterosexual monogamy,' write Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkoot (*Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* p. 111). However, to infer from the silence of Paul on such distinctions that he approved of some forms of homosexual behavior, is a conclusion that flies in the face of the Creator's intentions for humankind. Both passages seem to teach clearly that those who engage in homosexual practices, without repentance, cannot enter the kingdom of God.

We believe that a strong case can be made on the basis of the biblical texts we have just surveyed, that homosexual activity is contrary to God's design for humanity. The argument that these biblical references have to do with violations of the sacred law of hospitality (Sodom and Gibeah), with cultic taboos (Leviticus), with pederasty and shameful orgies (Romans), or with male prostitution (I Corinthians and I Timothy) denies these biblical passages their plain meaning. Moreover, we do not look only at the passages that speak of homosexual activity in our attempt to be guided by Scripture in this matter. We also have to take into account what the Bible says about marriage.

II. Theological Observations on Sex And Marriage

The creation account makes it clear that God created man as male and female (Gen. 1:27), and pronounced this creation order as "good" (Gen. 1:31)--an order endorsed as divine by our Lord (Mt. 19:4). Adam's masculinity and Eve's femininity were the result not of chance, but were part of the Creator's loving design and plan. Sexual differentiation is the basis for man and woman becoming

“one flesh.” Not only heterosexuality but monogamous marriage is the Creator’s ideal for humankind.

Professor Smedes of Fuller Theological Seminary writes, “It seems utterly clear to me that the Bible from the beginning to the end views the heterosexual union as God’s intention for sexuality. From the beginning ‘he made them male and female’ so that they might become ‘one flesh’. We have here the major assumption of all judgment on homosexuality: all human sexuality is intended to be climaxed in heterosexual marriage” (*Sex for Christians*, p. 67).

Some have argued that the creation account is not theologically normative for all times, for it reflects the Jewish concern for the procreative process, the interest in the bearing of children. A story, used to support this view, is that of Onan, who interrupted the sexual act while ostensibly carrying out his levirate duties, and who was punished by God for not “raising up seed” for his brother (Gen. 38:9). This argument, however, overlooks completely the fact that in the creation narrative there is a stronger emphasis on companionship and complementarity than on procreation. Eve, Adam’s “helper,” whom God made “suitable for him” was to be Adam’s sexual partner. That procreation was part of the divine will for marriage, also, is of course clearly stated in Genesis 1:28. The major emphasis, however, is on becoming “one flesh.” Heterosexual intercourse is more than simply a union of bodies; it is a blending of personalities. And the difference and the complementarity of male and female genitalia is simply a physical symbol of a much deeper spiritual complementarity.

In an article by John R. W. Stott, “Homosexual Marriage,” Stott writes:

The Scripture defines the marriage God instituted in terms of heterosexual monogamy. It is the union of one man with one woman, which must be publicly acknowledged (the leaving of parents), permanently sealed (he will “cleave to his wife”), and physically consummated (“one flesh”). Scripture envisages no other

kind of marriage or sexual intercourse, for God provided no alternative (*Christianity Today*, Nov. 1985, p. 25).

Similarly Dennis F. Kinlaw writes: "The prime argument against homosexuality lies . . . not in isolated texts nor in a particular interpretation of the Sodom story, but in the biblical view of the divine purposes of sexuality. The norm was established in Genesis 1 and 2 and is assumed throughout the rest of Scripture. Woman was made for man . . . just as man was made for woman" ("The Church and the Homosexual," in *The Secrets of our Sexuality*, p. 126).

The biblical passages that mention the topic of homosexuality must be brought into relation with the divine institution of marriage. Once that is done we are in possession of a theological principle that is universally applicable, not only to the culture of the ancient Near East and first-century Greco-Roman society, but also to modern questions about sexuality about which the ancients may have been less knowledgeable. The reason modern attempts at establishing loving permanent homosexual partnerships cannot be condoned as alternate Christian life-styles is that they are incompatible with God's creation order. An order established by the Creator is trans-cultural and omnitemporal. It is abundantly clear from Scripture that heterosexuality is affirmed and homosexuality (i.e., the practice) is condemned.

III. Pastoral Considerations With Respect to Homosexuals

A. A Christian Attitude

By contending that homosexual behavior is contrary to God's will, we have laid ourselves open to the charge of being bigotted, legalistic, and judgmental. Pittenger admonishes us to accept homosexual Christians as they are. If God has welcomed somebody who are we to pass judgment on him (Rom. 14:1ff.)? The whole point of the gospel, he insists, is that God loves and accepts us just as we are (*Time for Consent? A Christian's Approach to*

Homosexuality, p. 94). But this is only one side of the good news. The other side is that God in Christ calls us to a new way of life, and this life begins with repentance and deliverance from sin and the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who transforms believers into the image of Christ.

What then should be our attitude as Christians to the homosexual? We should remember, first of all, that people with homosexual orientation or even those who engage in homosexual activity are created in the image of God like the rest of humankind. "We who are heterosexual must show compassion because we are not talking about strange, sub-human, and monotonously stereotyped creatures," writes Smedes. "We are talking about persons who are as different from one another as heterosexual people are. We are talking about images of God" (*Sex for Christians*, p. 64). However, it should be added that we are also, all of us, in bondage to sin, and this leads to all kinds of distortions of the image of God in human beings.

Nevertheless, all people are created in the image of God, distorted though this image may be, and are the objects of Christ's redeeming love. The good news of the gospel is that Christ loved the world, and that includes every human being. It is, therefore, in bad taste when Christians, who have experienced the love of God, treat homosexuals as "filthy creatures," "disgusting perverts," and "damnable sinners"--to mention only a few of the derogatory phrases that one hears occasionally today.

Mark Olson tells of a public hearing in Montgomery County, Maryland, at which an ordinance was considered which would give full civil rights to gay and lesbian people. Local pastors came out in force and objected. And when the county board asked them what then they should do with such people, one minister, pointing to his Bible, answered, "Execute them."

To deny homosexuals basic human rights, to deny them our compassion and love, would be a violation of a fundamental teaching of the gospel and would put us into the same class as the religious leaders of Jesus' day who objected to his association with sinners, whom he had come to seek and save (Lk. 19:10).

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Homosexuals need to be treated with respect and dignity. For this reason, if homosexuals should be singled out for victimization with respect to housing, protection, and other services, believers should oppose such inequities. One does not condone homosexuality by pleading the cause of homosexuals as human beings who have the right to live in this world under the patience of God like other sinners (including self-righteous Pharisees).

Personal hostility towards homosexuals, “homophobia” as it is sometimes called (for it is a mixture of fear and hatred), is not fitting for Christ’s followers. Homosexuality is not an unpardonable sin. Moreover, some of the sexual perversions of people with heterosexual orientation are as displeasing to God as homosexual activity. Love for people, sinful, fallen people, includes also love for the homosexual.

B. Redemptive Approach

We will have to find our way between two common but wrong approaches to the homosexual: One, that homosexuality is simply a special form of normal sexuality, given to a person by God. Two, that homosexuality is a self-chosen perversion, and that homosexuals are decadent and dangerous creatures. The first is the judgment of sentiment, the other is the judgment of revulsion. Both are superficial and neither of them is redemptive.

There should be no question in our minds that God’s grace is offered to the homosexual as it is to the heterosexual. “All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The good news of the gospel is that God forgives our sin and lets us make a new beginning. A converted homosexual, Guy Charles, counsels his fellow believers not to quote the passages which condemn homosexuality when witnessing to a homosexual. Rather, he advises, passages that proclaim deliverance from sin and such which promise hope and life should be used (*The Church and the Homosexual*, p. 126).

Greg Bahnsen writes:

The church cannot be true to its mission on earth and turn away from evangelizing homosexuals, accepting them, when they repent, into fellowship of believers, and nurturing their growth in sanctification . . . The concern of the gospel is for the unrighteous without distinction. This precludes any attitude of moral superiority among sinners saved by grace . . . As such the gospel leaves no room for a loathing fear of the homosexual (*Homosexuality* p. 129).

Clearly homosexual activity is contrary to God's standards of righteousness. What then does it mean to take a redemptive approach toward the homosexual? Obviously we expect a change in behavior when a homosexual comes to Christ. Following that long list of ugly sins in which some of the Corinthians had indulged when they were still pagans, Paul testifies to the power of God's grace by adding, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:11). By repenting from their sins God gave them another chance--a chance to enter his kingdom. Repentance opened the way to freedom and virtue for them. Through repentance the healing waters of God's grace began to flow into their lives.

We cannot be accused of putting inhuman demands on homosexuals who embrace the gospel if we ask them to desist from homosexual activity. Sexual activity is, after all, not essential to human life; it is not indispensable to humanness. There are many believers who are called to singleness or whose lot it has been to remain single. Jesus was single, but he was perfect in his humanity. To say that chastity is impossible for homosexuals is to question the power of God. We expect nothing less of heterosexuals who are not married. That our society makes chaste living difficult has to be freely admitted, but to say it is not possible puts God's Word into question. Bennet Sims points out that each person functions within the limits of a life he has not chosen, "each of us with impairments of some kind, is responsible before God for what he or she does

with the gift of life in reference to God's revealed will" ("Sex and Homosexuality," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 1978, p. 28).

A burning question that is not easily answered when dealing redemptively with homosexuals is whether their homosexual leanings can ever be reversed or not. If heterosexuality is God's norm and ideal, can a homosexual be restored to heterosexuality? It is still not altogether certain whether homosexuality has a genetic base or whether it is an acquired trait or both. Some researchers are of the opinion that "constitutional" homosexuality is irreversible. But that may be a conclusion reached too easily by secular researchers who find no place for the transforming power of God's grace in their thinking.

Many Christian homosexuals have testified to the joy of forgiveness and to the power of God in helping them live chaste lives, even though their homosexual leanings remained. However, like many heterosexual Christian singles, they served the Lord with gladness in their single state. If I may quote Sims once again: "In the case of homosexuality, the stubbornness of its grip may be utterly unconquerable as a fixed and primary sexual orientation, but personal character may be so lifted (sainted) by the Spirit's power as to free the homosexual from the need of homosexual activity" (*Op.cit.*, p. 29).

On the other hand, we also have testimonies of homosexuals who experienced a reversal of their sexual orientation through the liberating grace of Christ, so that they could enter into meaningful marriage relationships with women. One should, however, not overstate the hope of such reversal, since our sexuality (both hetero- and homosexuality) has been damaged by sin, and there will be no complete restoration and healing this side of heaven.

The gospel calls the homosexual to repentance. Repentance is possible only if a person accepts responsibility for his or her condition. Self-pity and blaming God or other people shows an unwillingness to accept responsibility and hinders the healing process. Although this has to be said with great compassion, we cannot sacrifice our convictions with respect to God's moral standards for the life of the believer. Compassion does not mean

endorsement of a life-style that is displeasing to God. We cannot speak of compassion without cost, as if the mercy of God were available completely apart from the human response. God's grace is not cheap. To enter upon a new life Christ calls us to crucify the "old man," and to put on the "new man."

C. Membership In the Church

The church cannot be true to its calling and mission if it refuses to accept repentant homosexuals into its fellowship. A homosexual who has turned to Christ in repentance and asks for membership in the church must not be treated as an untouchable. Sinners saved by grace have no option but to receive forgiven sinners into fellowship without distinction and without contempt. But to receive a homosexual into the fellowship of the believers does not mean that the church endorses homosexual activity. It receives such people like others, as believers who are in the process of change and growth. Kenneth Kantzer writes, "Like our God, we must learn to love the sinner while condemning his sin. And we must learn to accept nonpracticing homosexuals as we would accept unmarried heterosexuals . . . we must affirm their honored position in Christ, we must recognize their ministry as essential to the spiritual health of the body" (*Christianity Today*, April, 1983, p. 9).

For the homosexual to enter the church may mean the development into a new identity as heterosexual, through healing, or the development into a new way of life that accepts the limitations put upon him or her by their past. God never calls us to carry burdens without giving us the strength to bear them. Smedes writes:

One important goal for the church's fellowship is the restoration of the homosexual as a person loved by God and of great worth in God's sight; but the only way this can be done is by demonstrating that he is also of great worth in the community's sight. A community of personal acceptance and support is the absolute imperative for any

ministry in Christ's name to the homosexual struggling to live the Christian life (*Sex for Christians*, p. 74).

Perhaps the following observations by Bernard Ramm are in place here:

The problem facing a given local church is that it must be a church of all forgiven sinners and not just a church of good sinners which excludes bad sinners. It is also a church that seeks not only life everlasting but a meaningful life on this earth. It must find the way then of treating the homosexual as a genuinely forgiven person if he trusts in Christ; as a fellowship of the redeemed the church should help the homosexual find real meaning for this life; and at the same time the church must prevent the homosexual from letting his pathology get out of control and become the source of serious difficulty in the church. There should be a frank confrontation with the homosexual in which the pastor . . . confronts the homosexual with the fact that his pathology is understood and that he is not to be treated judgmentally but in grace, forgiveness and redemption; and in return the homosexual must strive to be the essence of respectability in his conduct in the church (*The Right, the Good, and the Happy*, p. III f.).

It should be recognized, of course, that it takes time to be established in holiness. Therefore, the church must be prepared to deal patiently with homosexuals who have repented of their sins when they register failures in their attempts to live the Christian life. Patience towards those who fail does not mean that there should not be appropriate discipline when homosexual church members persist in homosexual activity (as there should be when heterosexuals engage in sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship). It is assumed, however, that the homosexual will not be singled out over liars, drunkards, fornicators, and the like.

Homosexuals who come to faith in Christ and who enter the Christian community may require special support groups in order to become established in their new way of life. It should not be necessary for new converts who have a homosexual background, or for church members who discover that they have homosexual leanings, to disclose their sexual orientation to the whole congregation. But they do need some confidants who will support them with friendship and prayer.

The best therapy for homosexuals is genuine Christian love--a love that is unconditional, but a love that is governed by God's Word. To urge the homosexual (or the heterosexual) to live chastely without providing support and the opportunity for intimate fellowship with other Christians is not true Christian love. I conclude with a word from John R. W. Stott: "The alternative is not between the warm physical relationship of homosexual intercourse and the pain of isolation in the cold. There is a third alternative, namely a Christian environment of love, understanding, acceptance and support (*Involvement II: Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, p. 243).

(This paper was originally given at the Mennonite Health Assembly, Anaheim, California, 1979.)

The “Place” of the Woman in the Church

No doubt some would prefer to sweep this topic under the rug, since the debates on this issue have led to some deep divisions in the ranks of evangelical Christians. A wiser approach, it seems to me, is to keep on searching for biblical answers.

The sharp disagreements on this question among Evangelicals clearly indicate that the differences do not necessarily stem from different views on the authority of God’s Word, but rather from the way the Scriptures are interpreted and applied. Nor can it be said that the conflicts in this area of biblical interpretation turn around the question of obedience to the Word of God, but I want to believe that it has to do with our understanding of what God’s Word teaches.

Within the limitations of space and time allotted to me I want to suggest some approaches to the New Testament which make reasonably good sense to me, even though one might wish that Jesus and the apostles had been more explicit in their teachings on this question. I limit myself to the following aspects of this topic: (a) The woman in Christ; (b) The woman as wife and mother; (c) the woman as servant in the church. I will comment more briefly on the first two, since the third aspect is the most problematic in our day.

I. The Woman in Christ

The text that most succinctly expresses the equality of male and female in Christ is Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the context Paul is discussing justification by faith or, to put it differently, the conditions for full inclusion in the Abrahamic covenant with its attendant blessings (v. 29). The one condition for membership in the new people of God is that of faith in Christ, expressed in baptism (v. 27).

The text does not deny the sexual differences between male and female, of course, any more than it denies ethnic distinctions (Jew and Greek) or the reality of socioeconomic evils (slave and free). In Christ, however, these distinctions are transcended, and the church must give clear evidence of that in its corporate life. There is something strikingly new here, for in earlier times a woman was a member of the covenant community by virtue of the male, who had the seal of the covenant, but in the church she is a member on the basis of faith, just like the man.

Peter joins Paul in giving the Christian woman a new place in Christ when he counsels husbands to give their wives honor "as fellow-heirs of the grace of life" (I Peter 3:7). Whereas the physical differences remain, spiritually she shares equally with her husband in the grace of God and in the gift of eternal life.

The crucial question that remains, however, is whether equality in Christ also means egalitarianism in all functions of the Body of Christ, the church. Before we deal with that we must also raise the question of where a Christian wife stands *vis-a-vis* her husband in the home.

II. The Christian Woman in The Home

Whereas both Jesus (Mt. 19) and Paul (I Cor. 7) teach that singleness is a noble state, they assume marriage to be the normal state of men and women. Also, marriage is to be monogamous and for life. In marriage husband and wife are equals in the area of conjugal relations: 'The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does' (I Cor. 7:4). Incidentally, in all the instructions on married life the emphasis

consistently lies on the duties of husband and wife, never on their rights.

What offends some modern Bible readers is Paul's exhortation to the wives to be submissive to their husbands. "Wives be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). It is often overlooked that in the preceding verse Paul exhorts all members of the church (male and female) to be subject one to another. Moreover, the model for the wife's submission to her husband is the submission of the church to Christ, her Lord, and surely that is not a galling subjection, but a submission deliberately and freely offered. Besides, the command to be submissive is balanced by a weightier command to the husband, namely to love his wife as Christ loved the church (v. 25). It is hard to see, then, why this command should be seen as so irksome in our day. Where the relationship of husband and wife is based on self-giving love, the question of "equal rights" will hardly be an issue in the relationship of man and wife.

It should be underscored that the role-relationship of man and woman in marriage is based not on the effects of sin (Gen. 3:16), but is rooted in a pre-Fall relationship, in which "complementarity" rather than "egalitarianism" is stressed (Gen. 2). Therefore, to view all the references to the husband's headship and the wife's submission as consequences of sin or, at best, reflection of first-century culture, with no abiding significance, is too simple a solution. With emphasis on the "self-realization" of the woman in our day, it should not be forgotten that authentic self-realization for both men and women is found in their willing submission to the divinely-appointed structures grounded in creation and redeemed by Christ (J. J. Davis, "Some Reflections on Galatians 3:28," *Journal of Theological Studies*, Summer 1976, 208).

And while we are on the topic of the home, the high calling and dignity of motherhood, ennobled for all time by our Lord's incarnation, needs to be underscored in our day. Whereas in the past Christian women often felt a deep sense of fulfillment in being good wives and mothers, today the confession, "I am only a housewife," is often made with some chagrin. This should not be so.

However, that does not mean that wives and mothers who pursue a calling outside the home are necessarily in violation of Scripture. Admittedly the New Testament does not mention the career woman, since the woman's place in the first century generally was the home. It would be wrong, however, to infer from this silence that there is no place for women in the professional world today.

Evidently there were some women even in Paul's day who aspired to leadership in the congregation and who felt that being a wife and mother was of secondary importance. Paul assures such women that "they will be saved through childbearing" (1 Tim. 2:15). Not that bearing children by itself will save any woman, but just as the married man experiences salvation in the circle of his calling, so the mother of the home need not fear that she will be short-changed in her experience of salvation by fulfilling her marital and maternal duties.

The more controversial question today, however, is the question of the woman's place in the ministries of the church.

III. The Christian Woman in The Church

A. Opportunities for Ministry

Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection and were among the 120 who experienced the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the church (Acts 1:14). There were a great many converts from among womenfolk in Jerusalem (Acts 5:14), in Samaria (Acts 8:12), and also in the Gentile world. The very fact that Luke would mention the conversion of both "men and women" is striking, for in the new order which Jesus brought both men and women have the freedom to accept (or reject) the gospel. That they were a force to be reckoned with can be seen from Paul's account that he had "dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

When Paul and his associates brought the gospel to Europe it all began with the conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:13ff.), and her

household became a base for further operations. (Another woman who put her house at the disposal of the church was Mary, the mother of Mark, Acts 12:12). At Thessalonica again a great many “leading women” became charter members of the church (Acts 17:4). An Athenian woman, who heard Paul’s Areopagus address, believed the gospel. She must have been an outstanding woman for she is mentioned by name (Damaris, Acts 17:34).

In Corinth Paul encountered a Jewish couple (Acts 18:3) who became his co-workers in the gospel. When Paul left for Syria, Priscilla and Aquila went with him to Ephesus, where they became the spiritual mentors of Apollos (Acts 18:26). Later this couple moved back to Rome where a church met in their house and Paul greets “Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,” in his letter to the Romans (16:3,4). They are greeted once again by the apostle in II Timothy 4:19. In the six references where this outstanding Christian couple is mentioned, Priscilla’s name stands first four times. Later scribes caught the significance of this order and in the Western Text of the Acts the order is reversed, for it seemed improper to have Aquila’s name stand after his wife’s. Was Priscilla more gifted than her husband? Did she come from a higher social class? We do not know; but it would not be wide of the mark to infer that she took the lead when Apollos was instructed in the faith.

Although it is difficult to define with precision what “prophecy” means in every instance in the New Testament, it is recorded that the evangelist, Philip, had four daughters who had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). That some form of spiritual ministry is implied, is obvious, I should think. Bruce humorously suggests, “Had the writer of Acts been a romancer, he would certainly not have missed the opportunity of putting some specific prophecy into the young ladies’ mouths” (*Commentary on Acts*, p. 424).

No one reading the Book of Acts could come to the conclusion that the early church was led by women. On the other hand, it would be unfair to overlook the vital role they played in the life of the church from its inception. This becomes quite obvious from the many women associates mentioned by Paul in his letters. He begs

his "yokefellows" to help two ladies, Euodia and Syntyche, to be of one mind, and recalls that they "labored with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers . . ." (Phil. 4:2,3). Precisely what the two Christian women had done for the advancement of the gospel is not stated, but Paul includes them with his male fellow-workers, and it seems rather obvious that they had done more than domestic work.

Perhaps nowhere is Paul's appreciation of the work of Christian women seen as clearly as in Romans 16. Altogether 26 names and three households are mentioned, and of the 26, nine or ten are women. The list starts with Phoebe who, it seems, was entrusted with the letter to the Romans. She is called *diakonos* (servant), which probably means "deaconess." This is possibly also the meaning in I Timothy 3:11, i.e., "women-deacons" rather than "wives of deacons." Paul recommends Phoebe to the Roman church as a saint who had helped him and many others (Rom. 16:1,2).

Of Priscilla and Aquila he says that these fellow-workers had "risked their necks for my life" (Rom. 16:4). The church met in their house in Rome. Among his friends whom he greets is Mary (v. 6), "Who has worked so hard for you" (i.e., the Roman church). This is the only reference to this particular Mary in the New Testament and we can only speculate on how she may have labored for the Christian cause in Rome.

One wishes we knew more about Junia (Julia) and Andronicus (v. 7), but it is impossible to decide whether the name Junia (Julia) is a feminine (AV) or a masculine (RSV, NEB, TEV). If Junia (Julia) is feminine, then we have a somewhat staggering encomium applied to her: "of note among the apostles." It may well be that Andronicus and Junia were a husband and wife team.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12) were possibly twin-sisters and are given honorable mention as "those who labored in the Lord." (Their names mean "dainty" and "delicate," respectively, as William Barclay suggests in *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 235). Paul may have had a twinkle in his eye when he dictated his letter to Tertius and mentioned these two women whose names belied the fact that they had worked like Trojans in Christ's cause.

In the same verse Paul addresses Persis: "Beloved Persis, who worked hard in the Lord." Does any other biblical writer address a Christian woman as affectionately as that? (Or did he mean "beloved" by the church?). We do not know about Rufus, but Paul makes an affectionate comment about his mother, "his mother and mine" (v. 13). Perhaps she made up to Paul the loss of his own mother's love when he was ostracized by his family (Phil. 3:8). Philologus and Julia were possibly a husband-wife team (v. 15). Also Nereus and a sister of his are singled out for a Christian greeting.

A close study of this chapter shows how Paul's family cuts across all the barriers of sex, race, social and economic status. Romans 16 may be seen as a kind of commentary on Galatians 3:28, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female."

There is no doubt that the mission of the church in its early years was greatly strengthened by the contribution of Christian women. The question concerning their place in the Christian assemblies in the first century, however, is not quite clear.

In I Corinthians 11:5 it appears to be assumed that a woman prays and speaks in public. Of course she is to observe the rules of propriety in the matter of dress which in Paul's day meant that she wear the customary head covering and that she distinguish herself from the man by the length of her hair. While it is true that Paul is not dealing primarily with the function of the woman in the gathered assembly in I Corinthians 11, but rather with her deportment, it would not be fair if we overlooked verse 5, in which she evidently is given the freedom to pray and to prophesy.

In the light of all the New Testament evidence one can only be amazed at the courage of Paul to break with his rabbinic past in order to restore to Christian womanhood some of that glory which her Creator intended her to have. There are, however, two passages in which he limits the Christian woman as far as her function in public worship is concerned.

How does one harmonize the so-called freedom passages with the restrictive passages? The temptation is to explain those we are

uncomfortable with in our modern culture in the light of the passages which appeal to us (these would then be for us the "plain" texts). Some interpreters explain the restrictive passages as reflections of first century culture and the freedom passages as the message of the gospel. "Traditionalists," as they are sometimes pejoratively called, go in the opposite direction, and explain the freedom passages in the light of the "plain" restrictive commands.

Professor Stendahl alerts us to something in Paul that is worth noting: "When Paul fought those who defended the old--as in Galatia--his bold vision of the new expressed itself most strongly, as in Galatians 3:28. When he discerned the overstatement of the new, he spoke for the old, as in Corinthians. Our problem is not to harmonize the two tendencies into a perfect system. It is . . . to discern where the accent should lie. (*The Bible and the Role of Women*, p. 37). Before we make any attempt at harmonizing, let us get the two restrictive passages before us.

B. Restrictions in Ministry

1. I Corinthians 14:34-36. "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them be subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."

Before we make some observations on these verses let me mention some ways in which interpreters have tried to harmonize this passage with I Corinthians 11, where women are seen as participating in the church's worship exercises by prayer and prophecy.

a. Since this passage (I Cor. 14:34-36) appears after verse 40 in some manuscripts, and since it seems to disrupt the flow of Paul's thought concerning the use of tongues and prophecy, some think this is an un-Pauline interpolation. However, there is no convincing argument that it is not part of Scripture.

b. Another view is that in chapters 11 and 14 Paul has two different worship services of the church in mind. Chapter 11

describes a meeting of believers only, at which the Christian woman has the freedom to pray and prophesy, while chapter 14 describes a meeting at which unbelievers could be present who might be offended if women spoke. Or, the reference to praying and prophesying is simply hypothetical and that Paul is not endorsing it. To all this we must say, that we do not know of two different types of congregational meetings in the early church, except that only baptized believers would participate in the Eucharist. And it would seem strange if Paul had mentioned the praying and prophesying of women without his endorsement of it.

c. Some think to pray and to prophesy is simply an idiomatic way of saying that women participated fully in the worship of the church, something Jewish women could not do in the Jewish synagogue. But did the daughters of Philip exercise their gift of prophecy outside of the worship services of the church?

d. Others think the speaking which Paul forbids in chapter 14 has to do with speaking in tongues. This is the view of Michael Green (*Called to Serve*, p. 56). Certainly if women spoke in tongues in public this would have added to the confusion that seems to have characterized some of the meetings of the Corinthian congregation. It is true that chapter 14 deals with tongues versus prophecy, but the command to be silent does not seem to be limited to speaking in tongues.

e. Another approach is this: in chapter 11 Paul had single women in mind, whereas in chapter 14 he addresses married women. Married women were to demonstrate their submission to their husbands by not speaking in public. Again, there is no indication in chapter 11 that Paul is restricting himself to single women; in fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case ("the man is the head of the woman," v. 3.)

f. The speaking that is forbidden in chapter 14, it has also been suggested, refers to women who sat separately from men chattering and disturbing the worship of the house-church. However, Paul does not appear to have casual conversation in mind.

g. Yet another approach is to limit the speaking which Paul forbids to asking questions. Women, in that case, were interrupting

the service with their questions. Paul advises them to ask their husbands at home and not to do so in the church.

h. The exhortation to keep silent, say others, has to do, with the testing of the prophets (14:29), i.e., for giving their opinion on what prophets were saying to the congregation. This would seem to indicate lack of submission to their husbands. But there is nothing in the text (14:34) that indicates that the speaking has to do with testing the words of the prophets.

i. Those who are willing to question Paul's writings as authoritative write the restrictive passages off as examples of failure on the part of the apostle to bring his practice in line with his theory regarding the new freedom of the woman in Christ. But to charge Paul with error at one point and accept his teaching at another makes us the arbitrators of what is an authentic Word of God and what is not.

j. Perhaps it is best to say that the command to keep silent in chapter 14 is culture bound. In that early period of the Christian church it would not have been acceptable for women to have the same freedom that men had to speak in public. Moreover, girls did not normally attend school; school was for boys. Paul wants Christian women to be informed (they are to "learn" 14:35), and once they have made progress in this area they will have greater freedom to speak. Paul did not want the church to fall into disrepute by allowing women to exercise a freedom they did not normally exercise in the society of that day. In a culture where it is perfectly acceptable when women speak in public, Christian women may also pray and prophesy like men.

It seems obvious that Paul did not mean the command for the women in the church to be silent to be understood in the absolute sense, otherwise they could not have participated in the worship of the church and in its mission as they did. Second, the reminder in chapter 14 that the women should be submissive may suggest that some women did not know how to handle their newly-found liberty very well. Third, Paul seems to have the creation account in mind when he counseled submission ("as the Law says"), suggesting that the new order of redemption has not done away with the creation

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order. Some commentators take the reference to the Law to be an allusion to Genesis 3:16, where the husband's rule over the wife is mentioned, but that is doubtful. Genesis 3:16 stands in the context of the curse, and it is hard to see why Paul would refer to the curse as a binding arrangement. Fourth, Paul wants the woman to be fully informed on matters of faith: "if they want to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home."

Looking at this restriction in I Corinthians 14 through the eyes of our current culture we tend to be offended by it, but we often fail to see how revolutionary Paul's views of the place of the woman in the church were in his day. Whereas the rabbis thought that to teach a woman the Torah was like teaching her to sin, Paul wants her to learn. A. Berkley Mickelson comments on the stricture of I Corinthians 14:

The context of this verse indicates that Paul was trying to help the Corinthians restore order in their church gatherings. A study of the culture shows that most Gentile women of that day were illiterate and Jewish women believers had no instruction in the Old Testament because rabbinical tradition forbade their being taught. In the synagogue and in the early Church, it was the custom for one person to read the Scriptures, perhaps speak, and for men of the congregation to interrupt with questions as they chose. The women of the Corinthian church were far behind the men in their religious understanding because of the culture of their area, and so Paul told them to save their questions until they got home and then ask their husbands (*Better Bible Study*, p. 14f.).

Leon Morris (in a public lecture) pointed out that in both the restrictive passages (I Cor. 14 and I Tim. 2) Paul mentions the "learning" of the women, and he suggested that the implication is that once she will have learned she will also be permitted greater freedom and fuller participation in public worship. It would then be wrong to universalize and to "freeze" the command to silence for all

times. In Paul's day it would have been disgraceful for a Christian woman, illiterate and unlearned, to assume a leadership role in a Christian assembly. However, she is to be fully informed about the great truths of redemption and about the Christian life. By implication, we could say, once she has learned and once she finds herself in a situation where it is not considered improper for a woman to speak in public she may well be asked to do so. Submissiveness, of course, is an essential trait of the Christian life.

2. 1 Timothy 2:11,12. "Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman, being quite deceived, fell into transgression."

In a day when women did not teach elsewhere in public it would have been out of character if Paul had thrown open the doors wide and encouraged women to become leaders in the church. Moreover, the heretical teachings which Paul combats in this letter may have been furthered by untaught women who had, by virtue of their gifts, taken leadership in teaching. Some interpreters infer from this that once she will have learned she may teach, but for the moment Paul wants her to desist.

To learn in quietness probably means that she should not raise objections to what was taught. Speaking and "silence" are not mutually exclusive. For example, when Peter reported on his fellowship with the Gentiles (Acts 11), the Jewish brothers became "quiet" and "praised God" (v. 18). Did they praise God in silence? Hardly! But they did not object to Peter's mission to the Gentiles. Or, take Acts 21:14, where the disciples at Caesarea tried to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem. When they could not they were "quiet" and "said", "The will of the Lord be done." Here clearly to be quiet does not mean that they said nothing, but rather it means they no longer objected. This would be in line with I Corinthians 14, where constant interruption with questions (if that was indeed the case) or even objections would have caused confusion in worship.

In our passage "silence" probably means the opposite of lording it over the husbands. Indeed quietness here is linked with submission--the kind that is expected of all church members (Eph. 5:20), even of the male prophets who spoke (I Cor. 14:30). Certainly Paul does not mean that a woman is not to be heard in church, but rather that there is not to be any wrangling and arguing.

Verse 12, however, states clearly that it is inappropriate for a woman to teach or to lord it over the man; she is to be "in quietness," i.e., in submission. That he did not forbid the woman to teach altogether is clear: Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:1-3, 24-26), Euodia and Syntyche labored side by side with Paul in the gospel (Phil. 4:2ff.). And, of course, Paul wants women to teach their children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15). How otherwise would Timothy have known the Scriptures from childhood? Older women are urged to teach younger women (Tit. 2:3-5). If women participated in prayer and prophecy when the church was gathered (I Cor. 11), they exercised some kind of teaching function.

Clearly the prohibition against women teaching is not to be absolutized, for it is not absolutized in the New Testament. Nor have we absolutized it in the twentieth century, for we have never thought it inappropriate for women missionaries to instruct the future pastors of our mission churches.

Some find the way out of the dilemma by distinguishing between two kinds of teaching in the early church: the instructive, discursive, kerygmatic, in which women might participate, and the authoritative, doctrinal teaching, the kind Timothy is asked to do in the face of heretics, in which she should not take part. Such a distinction might be helpful in harmonizing the texts of the New Testament, but it is a distinction that is quite impossible to make on the basis of the New Testament.

Others see the restriction as limited to women leadership functions. Perhaps the verb to "teach" and *authenteo* ("to act out of oneself" and then to act autocratically, or to interrupt) are used here as parallels. By implication the woman may well instruct the congregation if it is done under the leadership of a man.

Others insist on universalizing and “freezing” this prohibition without taking into account the situation in which these instructions were given. On the one hand, the ascetic emphasis in Gnosticism may have led to the disparagement of family life, marriage and child birth on the part of some women who insisted on playing a leading role in the teaching ministry of the church (perhaps v. 15 suggests that too). On the other hand, we may have had a situation in Ephesus (where Timothy labored) such as is reflected in the letter to Thyatira (Rev. 2:18ff.), “I have against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebeel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” This would be the libertarian wing of Gnosticism.

As in the case of I Corinthians 14, so also here, Paul takes us back to the early chapters of Genesis to support his argument that certain limitations should be put upon women with respect to public ministry in the church. “And Adam was not deceived but the woman was thoroughly deceived and fell into transgression.” This offends some modern readers, and there is no agreement on the exact meaning of this reference to the Fall in Genesis

3. Here are some attempts at understanding the apostle:

a. Behind this statement lies the Gnostic tendency to despise marriage and family in the interest of greater holiness and openness to God. Paul may then be warning such women that just as Eve, when she was alone, was approached by the Tempter and fell into sin, the woman should be careful. That there were such deceivers who forbade marriage is clearly stated (4:3).

b. Another suggestion is that Paul counsels against giving to a woman a position of authority in the church because she is by her nature more sensitive and perceptive, and so in greater danger of being led astray by false teachers.

c. A third line of thought goes like this: Since Eve tried to lead once and created chaos for humankind, her punishment for all times is that she may not lead. This is problematic, if for no other reason than that elsewhere in the New Testament Adam stands at the head

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of the sinful fallen race. Moreover, it would mean, then, that Paul was determined in his instructions on the place of the woman in the church, not by what happened in Christ, but by what happened in sin. But the very next verse reminds us that the woman too experienced salvation in Christ just like the man.

d. A fourth way to go is to say that what Paul says in this passage is a left-over from his rabbinic past and should not be taken seriously. But then we might be tempted to ignore Paul's instructions whenever they do not suit us--an approach that those who hold to the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures cannot take.

e. A fifth approach does not ignore the restrictive passages in Paul, but asks us to interpret them in the light of the culture of Paul's day or in the light of a unique current situation in Ephesus. In that case I Timothy 2:11,12 had only local and temporary significance.

In my opinion Paul's command for women to be silent in the church's assemblies must be understood, in part at least, in the light of the status of womanhood in the society of his day. Had the apostle not taken the feelings and prejudices of the contemporary world into account the gospel would have come into disrepute. Which means that where cultural patterns differ, Paul's strictures must also be modified. However, we must also be careful not to let current trends in our society determine which teachings of Scripture are acceptable and which are not.

As we look over the biblical texts that speak to the question of the ministry of women in the congregation, we feel the tension between those passages which stress the new freedom of the woman in Christ and the restrictive passages. So how do we find our way, given these seemingly contradictory emphases? Let me mention some approaches that churches are taking:

a. There are those who insist that the restrictive passages must be our guide. They are to be viewed like other apostolic teachings which are applicable to all cultures and for all times. This approach usually stresses that men and women have different roles and that

these are rooted in the order of creation. Redemption in Christ, it is argued, does not undo what has been established in creation.

b. The exact opposite approach has been taken by others who feel that the emphasis on the liberation and spiritual endowment of the Christian woman outweighs the restrictive passages. The latter are then understood as having local, cultural and temporal significance.

c. A third way is to respect both the freedom as well as the restrictive passages. In this approach both the man and the woman are seen as equal in Christ but as fulfilling somewhat different roles in the congregation. This is not to be understood in terms of superiority and inferiority; both are created in the image of God, and both are saved by grace and endowed by God's Spirit to serve the church. Not the status of the woman but the function needs to be defined. And this has been done in different ways in the various denominations. Our own denomination, I believe, is willing to have women serve in all areas of ministry in the church for which they are qualified, but not as leading pastors. That approach simply reflects the desire to give Christian women abundant scope for service and at the same time to respect the restrictive passages of Scripture. Until we have more light and until we are more united in our understanding of this important question, this is probably the best solution.

(This paper was given first at the Canadian Conference in 1974 and was given later in a somewhat revised form at a study conference convened by Mennonite Central Committee, as well as at a study conference convened by the Board of Faith and Life of our General Conference.)

The Last Days

The shape of things to come is of deep concern to many people in our day--both believers and unbelievers. One sign of the deep insecurity and the pessimism of the unbelieving world is the current interest in astrology. William Dyrness writes: "But the danger is that Christians, experiencing this same sense of helplessness in face of world events, can replace astrology with biblical prophecy" ("The Age of Aquarius," in *Dreams, Visions and Oracles* edited by Armerding and Gasque, p. 23).

There appears to be an apocalyptic mood in the Western world. The church scene also reflects an almost feverish concern with the End. Bookstores are doing brisk business as hundreds of thousands of readers snap up the latest paperbacks on prophecy. Many of the titles of these colorful publications have a sensational ring to them and elicit enthusiastic reader response.

Many of these writings might command more confidence if the writers all came to the same conclusions. While all of them (at least those in the evangelical stream) claim to base their studies on Holy Writ, they disagree widely in their findings--to the consternation of many devout Christian folk. One reason for this disagreement--one which many find hard to admit--is that the Bible does not provide us with sufficient information to make it possible for its readers to plot the course of future events in detail. Perhaps even harder to admit is the fact that our understanding of what seems to be clearly stated in the Scriptures is limited and fallible.

This should, however, not lead us to an avoidance of the subject of eschatology. The Bible from beginning to end is eschatological; both Old and New Testament look forward to the day when God will intervene in this world's history in a decisive way. Moreover, most evangelicals are agreed on those truths which

belong to the essence of our hope: the return of Christ in glory, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of all humankind, and the eternal bliss of the redeemed--quite enough to give our life seriousness, purpose, and joy.

Throughout history, however, there have been those whose curiosity led them to develop rather detailed structures of the last days. Such time-schemes are intriguing to some believers; others find them confusing. Much more serious, however, is the fact that disagreements over side-issues in eschatology often lead to deep divisions among Bible readers. What is more, those areas which are not so clearly taught in the Scriptures are often pushed into the centre and thereby the deep unity of faith which all those who confess the Bible to be their ultimate authority in matters of doctrine should enjoy, is endangered. Or, when certain methods of interpretation are equated with the Bible itself, then anyone who interprets the Bible differently is obviously not biblical. One topic on which there is considerable misunderstanding is that of "the last days."

Everywhere today one hears believers say, "we are in the last days." When one probes a little deeper one soon discovers that the term "last days" is not understood in the same way by everyone. There are those who confidently proclaim that the last days began in 1948, with the establishment of the modern state of Israel, and that God will wrap up this present age not later than 1980. It may well be that the last trumpet will sound by 1980 (this paper was written in 1978), but what about all those faithful followers of Jesus through the long centuries of the Christian era who also believed that they were living in the last days? Were they wrong? Our answer would depend on how we understand the term "last days." It is the purpose of this paper to examine what the New Testament means by "the last days," and to raise the question of the imminence of the End. We will also inquire briefly into the signs of the "last days," and conclude with a few comments on the challenge of living in the last days.

I. The Meaning of "Last Days".

A. The Beginning of "the Last Days."

According to the prophets of old the new age would be inaugurated by the outpouring of God's Spirit upon humankind (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28). Peter saw the fulfilment of these prophecies (specifically that of Joel) in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). With the coming of the Spirit the last days had begun. F. F. Bruce, in commenting on Acts 2:17, puts it this way: "The 'last days' began with Christ's first advent and will end with his second advent; they are the days during which the age to come overlaps with the present age" (*Commentary On Acts*, NICNT, p. 68).

The coming of the Spirit was only the capstone of the Christ-event, and so it is equally correct to say that Christ inaugurated the last days. The prophets wondered about the time of Christ's coming, says Peter (I Pet. 1:10f.), but now that Christ has been "manifested at the end of the time" (I Pet. 1:20), the matter is clear.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, states that "the ends of the ages" have met in the believers of the apostolic age (I Cor. 10:11). While God spoke in many and various ways in the past, says the writer to the Hebrews, "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:2). The same writer speaks of "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5), which are experienced by believers today. Also, speaking of Christ's first advent, he affirms that Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the ages" (9:26).

John in his first epistle tells his "little children" twice that it is the last time or hour (I John 2:18). Since the new age had dawned with the coming of Christ, Christians knew that they were living in the last days. Of course, the present evil age was still very much in existence, but as Paul puts it, Christ "delivered us from this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). And while the church knows that the powers of darkness are still at work, the darkness is already passing away and true light is shining (I John 2:8).

John R. Stott writes, "All Jews were familiar with the division of history into 'the present age' and 'the age to come' (cf. e.g. Mt. 12:32), and the New Testament teaches that 'the age to come' came with Jesus. He inaugurated it, so that the two ages overlap one another" (*Commentary On Epistles of John, Tyndale*, p. 93).

This period in which the two ages overlap was, however, viewed as transitional. The "last days", which began with Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:1,2; Jam. 5:3), or the "last times" (I Pet. 1:20; 1 Cor. 10:11) were viewed as lasting only for a period of time. The age to come had broken into history and therefore this present age was drawing to a close (I Cor. 7:31). This interim between Christ's first and second coming would not last forever. The "last days" were to end when the "last day" arrived (John 6:39,40,44,54; 11:24; 12:48); the "last times" come to an end with the "last time" (I Pet. 1:9).

That this interim would last as long as it has (or may yet last) was not known to the New Testament writers, for the day and the hour of the consummation of this age is hidden in God. God is not bound by our clocks and calendars. But we know, on the authority of his Word, that these last days in which the church has lived so long will come to an end.

B. The Consummation of the "Last Days"

While the New Testament church had the deep conviction that the "last days" had begun with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit, the Spirit was also the guarantee that these last days would not last forever. For this reason the Spirit is called the "first fruits" of the harvest that is yet to come (Rom. 8:23), and the "down payment" on the inheritance into which we are yet to enter (Eph. 1:14). "Through the Spirit we wait for the hope of righteousness" (Gal. 5:5).

We must then distinguish clearly between the "last days" and the "last day." Our Lord spoke repeatedly of the "last day." "And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:39,44,54), is our Lord's promise to those who believe in him. Martha, in the midst of her

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grief at the death of Lazarus, still clung firmly to the hope that “he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day” (John 11:24) and Jesus did not question that hope. Jesus warns that his word will judge those who reject him “in the last day” (John 12:48).

Another way of speaking of the “last day” is to call it the consummation, the wrap-up (*sunteleia*). Jesus’ disciples on one occasion asked the Master: “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age” (Mt. 24:3). Notice here the connection between the coming of Christ and the consummation of this age! Jesus himself had spoken several parables that focused on the “close” of the age (Mt. 13:39,40,49). One of the last words of Jesus shortly before he ascended to heaven were: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

Sometimes the last day, the consummation, is called simply “the day” (I Thess. 5:5; 1 Cor. 3:13; Heb. 10:25). It is shorthand for what the Old Testament repeatedly calls “the day of the Lord” (cf. Mal. 3:19). At other times the demonstrative is added and we get it in the form of “that day” (Mt. 7:22; Lk. 10:12; 2 Tim. 1:12,18). It is also called “the great day” (Jude 6; Rev. 6:17; 16:14). More commonly, however (especially in Paul), the last day is called “the day of the Lord” (I Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2) or “the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:10,12; Rev. 16:14). And since Jesus was called “Lord” by early Christians, the Old Testament term “day of the Lord” was easily recast and becomes the “day of Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6,10; 2:16).

Occasionally the character of the day is denoted by such phrases as “the day of judgment” (Mt. 11:22,24; 12:36; 1 John 4:17; 2 Pet. 2:9) or “the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5). But it is also a “day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). It is the day when the “last” trumpet will sound (1 Cor. 15:52) and the “last” enemy (death) will ultimately be overcome (1 Cor. 15:26).

This last day is also called simply “the end” (*telos*). Jesus in his apocalyptic discourse warned, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the “end” is not yet” (Mk. 13:7). Prior to the “end”, the gospel is to be preached in all the world (Mt. 24: 14). According to 1 Corinthians 15:24, the

end will come when Christ delivers the kingdom over to the Father after conquering all evil powers.

We see then, that the "last days" began with Christ, but the "last day" is yet to come. The "end times" were inaugurated with Christ's coming, but "the end" has not yet come. When the consummation of this present age will occur we do not know, and Jesus forbade us to speculate (Acts 1:7). What then do we do with the many passages in the New Testament which state that the end, the consummation, the last day, the coming of Christ, is near? Let us see what the New Testament has to say on that.

II. The Imminence of the "Last Day"

A. The Closeness of the End

Quite obviously the New Testament writers held that the coming of the Lord was near. Paul lived and served with the consciousness that "the appointed time has grown very short" (I Cor. 7:29). Writing to the Romans he reminds them, that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:11,12). (Whether Philippians 4:5, "the Lord is near," is strictly eschatological is not quite certain.)

Other apostolic writers share Paul's view that time is hastening to the end. "The end of all things is near," says Peter (I Pet. 4:7). James writes, "Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near" (Jas 5:8). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to encourage one another and this "all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25).

John, too, stresses the imminence of the end. "Little children it is the last hour," he writes (I John 2:18). The Book of Revelation begins and ends with the reminder that "the time is near" (Rev. 1:3; 22:10). Hans Lilje comments on this expression:

The short sentence 'the time is near' is like a wave of the hand, by which the seer summons the readers and hearers

of this book to come with him to the outermost ramparts of time, to the point where time will be fulfilled, where at last all the confusion of the course of history will fade away, into the evening of world history, and already the light of the new morning begins to shine, which is no longer that of this world at all (*The Last Book of the Bible*, p. 43).

Another way in which John stresses the imminence of the end is to say that the things which God had revealed to him about the future would take place “quickly” (Rev. 1:1; 22:6--*en tachei*; 2:16; 3:11; 22:7,20--*tachu*; the root of our word tachometer). “I come quickly,” is our Lord’s word of assurance to the suffering saints of Asia Minor.

Since John wrote, 1900 years have passed, and that makes such expressions problematic for some Bible readers. One way of reading such statements is to say that when God’s hour strikes then things will happen quickly. Another way is to understand the concept of “quickly” in the sense of “certainly.” Caird thinks that it is the persecution of the church that John had in mind and not the consummation of history (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 12). But a much sounder approach is to understand John as expressing “*urchristliches Zeitgefühl*.” In the presence of eternity time shrinks together; the perspective is abbreviated. The church lives always in the twilight just before the dawn of the eternal kingdom. Mounce writes, “The tension of imminence is endemic to that span of redemptive history lying between the cross and the *parousia*” (*Revelation*, NICNT, p. 392).

There is, however, an added nuance in the concept of “quickly.” It underscores God’s control of history. The suddenness with which God acts is a sign of his power. “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1). “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Lk. 2:13); “And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind” (Acts 2:2). Nothing stops God from

acting when the time has come and the final hour of this world's clock has struck.

A saying of Jesus which has puzzled Bible readers through the centuries seems to suggest (at least on the surface) that Jesus himself expected the end to come shortly. In his apocalyptic discourse he says, "Verily I say to you, This generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished" (Mk. 13:30). The question is, however, whether we know for certain what Jesus meant with "generation" (*genea* is used either in the sense of people or of time). Does he mean the human race? The Jewish people? The Christians? This "sort of people?" Jesus' contemporaries? The latter is the view of Lagrange, Bruce, Lane, Cullmann and others, except that some would limit "all these things" (*tauta panta*) to the destruction of Jerusalem, while others take it to refer to Christ's passion, resurrection and ascension. Certainly we do violence to the text when we insist that a generation is 30 to 40 years, peg the beginning of "this generation" at 1948, and on the basis of that kind of calculation predict the date of Christ's coming. All one needs to do is to read two more verses in Mark 13 to know that this is wrong, for in verses 32,33 Jesus says, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come." (That the early church preserved this somewhat embarrassing saying, makes it all the more trustworthy. While Luke omits "nor the Son," and some manuscripts omit it in Matthew 24:36, it is very secure in Mark.)

B. The Problem of the Delay

The apostles have been charged with error for teaching that they were living in the last days and that they expected the Lord to return in their lifetime. Indeed, some New Testament scholars argue that some of the teachings of Jesus were deliberately recast as the awareness of the fact that the church might continue on earth for some time grew upon them. Others have tried to show, that there is a gradual decline of the hope in the imminent return of our Lord in

the letters of Paul. That, however, is somewhat hard to prove, for even in the Pastorals hope still burns brightly (e.g., Tit. 2:11ff.). On the other hand, in I Thessalonians (which may be the earliest letter of Paul extant), he takes into account the possibility of dying before the *parousia* takes place: "Whether we wake (live) or sleep (die), we might live with him" (I Thess. 5:10).

Hand in hand with the hope of the imminent return of Christ in the first century church, there are also clear indications that there would be an interim between the two comings. And this expectation of an interim was not simply born out of a delay of Christ's return, but was anticipated by Jesus. It is, for example, inherent in the commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. One can see it also in the comments Jesus made about the loving act of the woman who poured the costly ointment on him: "Truly, I say to you, where the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). That would take time!

This twofold attitude of the believers regarding the return of Christ--that it is near, and that it may yet be far away--has characterized the church's time of waiting from the first century up to the present (and it must continue to do so). It is for this reason that we have repeated admonitions in the writings of the New Testament to remain calm and to wait patiently for Christ's coming. "We wait for it with patience," says Paul (Rom. 8:24). The farmer, as James has it, "waits patiently for the precious fruits of the earth . . . You also be patient . . . for the coming of the Lord is near (Jam. 5:7). Indeed, Christ will return a second time "to save those who eagerly wait for him" (Heb. 9:28).

Already in the first century there were those who made mockery of the Christian hope of our Lord's return (and they are still with us). As the time of waiting was extended they asked, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). And Peter gives a three-fold answer to these scoffers: (a) God's word was fulfilled in the past, and so it is reasonable to expect his promise about his coming to be fulfilled in this instance as well (vv. 5-7); (b) God does not measure time the way we do. "With the Lord one day is as a

thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (v. 8); (c) The reason this time of waiting is extended is, that God is forbearing and does not wish that any should perish but that all should reach repentance (v. 9). God's grace is extending this day of salvation. Therefore, while the church prays, "Come, Lord Jesus" (*maranatha*)! it thanks God for every day of grace that he gives to humankind.

C. Living In the Last Hour

Rather than accusing the apostles of error in their hope of the imminent return of Christ, we should learn from them how to live in this last hour. It is quite appropriate for us (as it was for Paul) to say, "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15). We too can confidently affirm, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (I Cor. 15:51). (The fact that some copyists changed this to read: "We shall all sleep but we shall not all be changed," suggests that they wanted to save Paul from the accusation that he had erred.)

There is throughout the New Testament a dual emphasis of the "already" and the "not yet." There is an awareness of a time of waiting in which the church is to carry out its commission (the words of assurance, "Lo, I am with you to the end of the age" are given precisely to those who carry out this commission), but there is also a lively expectation of the coming of the Lord. However, no author ever attempts to predict the precise time of Christ's coming. When believers get caught up in the excitement of the imminent return of the Lord (as did the Thessalonians), they had to be reproved and told to go back to their daily work (I Thess. 4:11f.). They are warned not "to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2 Thess. 2:2).

To live in the last hour does not mean that we constantly talk about the end of the world. It means rather that we "redeem the time for the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). To live in the last hour means to labor faithfully in the calling which God has given to us,

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“know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (I Cor. 15:58). It means to live loosely to the things of this world--”those using the world as not using it to the full, for the form of this world passes away” (I Cor. 7:31).

If, as we confess, our commonwealth is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), then we live as “aliens and exiles” in this world (I Pet. 2:11). Paul Minear (in a class lecture) suggested that the closest modern equivalent to the New Testament concept of the “pilgrim” is the word “refugee.” Pilgrimages to the Holy Land in our day are often a sign of our material affluence, for we can always return to our comfortable homes. The refugee has no homeland. Where believers are conscious of living in the last hour, they confess with the writer of the Epistle to Diognetus, in the early 2nd century, that “every foreign land is our homeland and every homeland is a foreign land” (5:5).

To live in the last hour means to have our loins girt and our lamps burning through prayer and repentance, waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom.

We turn now to the question of the signs of the times, which are often interpreted in such a way that suggests we can know (at least approximately) when the Lord will return and the last day will dawn.

III. The Signs of the “Last Days”

A. Mistaken Interpretations of Signs

If we take seriously what the New Testament says about the last days, or last times, namely that these refer to the entire interim between the two comings of Christ, then the signs of the last days must also be the kind that are in evidence throughout this time of waiting. If the Bible is to be relevant to the life of the church throughout the ages, then what it has to say about the signs of the times must have some meaning also for Christians in all generations. Because this was not understood, influential speakers and writers

have again and again identified current events as clear indicators on God's time-clock.

And no sooner had one prognostication of the date of our Lord's return failed, then the next one was made. As early as the second century we have the attempts by the Montanists to predict the end of the world before the end of their century. Many Christians were certain that the year AD 1000 would mark the end of the church age, and certainly as we approach the year 2000 we can expect a repetition of this phenomenon. Martin Luther was at times quite certain that the world would come to an end in his lifetime. Was not Antichrist (the Pope) already reigning? Even Gog and Magog were upon the scene (i.e., the moslem Turks).

John Wesley followed the Pietist theologian, Johann Bengel, in expecting the overthrow of the Beast in 1836. C. I. Scofield, with many others, was deeply convinced that World War I marked the beginning of the final conflict, which would bring this age of grace to an end. Leonard Sale-Harrison felt that the end would come in 1940 or 41, because of what he thought was the revival of the Roman Empire under Benito Mussolini. More recently, Dr. Charles R. Taylor (*Jesus Is Coming*, p. 89) proposed September 6, 1976, as the date of Christ's coming. Taking 1948 as his starting point, and allowing 35 years for a generation, and then applying Jesus' promise, "This generation shall not pass away till all these things take place," to our day, he arrives at the date 1983. Subtract seven years of tribulation (which in his understanding follows the Rapture) and we get 1976. It is exactly this kind of thing that discredits prophecy to such a degree that many sincere Christians turn away in disgust and leave the subject to cranks.

If we believe that Christ's coming is very near because of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, then what did the imminence of the *parousia*, which Christians have adhered to throughout the centuries, mean to them when there was no state of Israel?

All such attempts at date-setting arise out of the conviction (misguided, we think) that current events can not be made to match biblical prophecies. On what grounds, for example, can it be said

that modern Russia is the Gog and Magog of Ezekial 38 and 39, and that therefore the end must be near? (Interestingly, in Revelation 20:8 Gog and Magog represent the evil forces that attack the people of God after the millennium, not before.)

But are there then no signs that might alert us to the imminence of the parousia? Indeed there are, but they are the kind of signs that make sense in any generation, in the first century as well as the last. Let us give some examples:

B. Signs of the Last Days

There is considerable disagreement among biblical scholars on how many signs of the times are mentioned in the New Testament. In a recent booklet by A. Skevington Woods, *Signs of the Times* (Baker, 1970), eighteen such signs are listed. We will restrict ourselves to a few, which may serve as examples.

In answer to the question of the disciples about the sign of the end, our Lord, in his apocalyptic discourse recorded in Mark 13 (parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21), mentions a number of signs. Some of the signs point clearly to the developments that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem, others again must be understood as characterizing end-times generally. Here are some of the signs Jesus mentioned:

1. Deception. Jesus warned that the the end-times would be characterized by deception. False Christs would rise and lead many astray (Mk. 13:5,6). The warning is repeated in Mark 13:22, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect."

Paul wrote something similar to Timothy: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared" (I Tim. 4:1,2). Peter is equally emphatic: "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . And many will follow their licentiousness . . . (2 Pet. 2:1,2). Similarly John in the Revelation says of the beast from the land that "by the signs which

it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast (from the sea), it deceives those who dwell on earth" (13:14). This was happening in the Asiatic churches while John wrote and this has happened throughout the Christian era, and will continue to happen right to the end.

The deception of the saints that we are witnessing in our day is frightening. We are surrounded by a chaos of cults. And it has to be asked, seriously, whether much of what is published today in the name of prophecy does not fall into the category of what Paul condemns as the desire for "teachings which tickle the ears." That too, he suggests, is a sign of the last days (2 Tim. 4:3). Of course there were deceivers already in the first century and it would be hard to say how close we are to the end by pointing to the profusion of cults (not to mention the occult). The need for watchfulness is as great today as it was in the days of the apostles.

2. War. A second sign of the end-times mentioned in Mark 13 is war. "When you shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be not troubled: These things must needs come to pass; but the end is not yet" (v. 7). The disciples were not to think that when war broke out (as it did in AD 66) that the end of the world was imminent. The entire interim preceding the return of Christ was to be marked by war. The first apocalyptic rider which John saw riding across the pages of human history had a bow and "he went out conquering and to conquer" (Rev. 6:2). And the one that followed him, on a bright-red horse, was to take away peace from the earth, "so that men should slay one another; and he was given great sword" (6:4).

While there have been long periods of peace in some parts of the world, war has been the tragic lot of humankind throughout history. The year 1914 marked the beginning of the first universal war, followed by another shortly after (1939-1945). With the dropping of the first atomic bomb the threat of total annihilation has hung over our planet like a sword of Damocles. And whereas Christ's followers seek to preserve, not to destroy life, and whereas they do what they can to establish peace, the church must be prepared to live and to work in the midst of a war-torn world until the day comes when nations will wage war no more (Isa. 2:4).

There are those who are convinced that a third world war would mark the end of this age. That may well be, but it would be rash to proclaim that as a biblical teaching. While there is no doubt that history is moving to a final showdown between God and the forces of evil, it would be presumptuous to predict that the next war will be Armageddon (Rev. 16:16). War is a sign of the times until our Lord himself appears with the armies of heaven to make an end of all rebellion against God (Rev. 19).

3. Earthquakes. Jesus mentions earthquakes in answer to the disciples' question about the signs of the end (Mk. 13:8). Earthquakes occurred throughout the Christian era, swallowing up entire cities and their inhabitants. The seismologists have their scientific explanation for them. Of late earthquakes seem to have increased in frequency (or is it that the seismograph and the television screen have made us more conscious of their frequency and their terror?). The book of Revelation, which portrays the end-times with apocalyptic imagery, mentions earthquakes no fewer than five times (6:12; 8:5; 11:13,19; 16:18).

We do not know how many earthquakes we will yet witness before the end comes, but every tremor is God's reminder that the existence of all who dwell on this earth is insecure, and every quake is a call to humankind to turn to God in repentance before the day comes when he will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens (Heb. 12:26).

4. Famine. Jesus mentions famine together with earthquakes (Mk. 13:8). Famine is a frequent aftermath of war, and the rider that follows the one who brings bloodshed (Rev. 6:4) rides on the black horse of famine (6:5). Famine is often caused by natural catastrophes, such as drought. Much of the hunger in our world, however, is due to man's own mismanagement of nature's gifts. But whatever may be the causes, famine is a sign of the endtimes. From the time of Agabus, who predicted a famine in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28), until the return of our Lord, when we will hunger and thirst no more, there will be famines. The forecasts of world-famine are so frightening that some scientists fear that should this earth

escape a nuclear holocaust, it may end with an exhaustion of its food supplies. We do not know.

Meanwhile, Christians must be in the forefront in bringing relief to the hungry. Those who ask in the judgment: "Lord when did we see you hungry . . . ?" receive the answer: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:37,40).

War, famine and earthquakes, said Jesus, were the "beginning of travail" (Mk. 13:8). They will characterize end-times unto the eternal kingdom appears with the return of our Lord. Christ's followers must, therefore, be prepared to face a turbulent world with faith and confidence.

5. Persecution. This is another sign mentioned by Jesus (Mk. 13:9,11-13). The church will always be under fire. With varying degrees of intensity and extent, persecution has been the lot of the church in every century. Jewish tribunals, the persecutions of the Caesars, the tortures of the Inquisition, the blood of the Anabaptist martyrs, the concentration camps in Siberia and the recent martyrs of Uganda, all tell the story of the way that leads from the cross to the crown.

There has never been an age when somewhere in the world Christians have not suffered for the faith. And while Christians thank God for every country that has freedom of religion, and while they do not deliberately make martyrs of themselves, they know "that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (I Tim. 3:12)--if not by sword and thumbscrew, then by ridicule or job-discrimination.

6. Mission. One sign of the end-times, which is of a quite different order than the ones mentioned so far, is the preaching of the gospel to all nations (Mk. 13:10). Mark 13:10 stands between two verses which speak of persecution (vv. 9 and 11), as if to suggest that the resistance which the church will experience from the world is often prompted by her evangelistic efforts. In any case, before the end comes, the Good News must be preached to all nations. The consummation will not take place until the mission of the church is complete. This does not mean, however, that we can

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tell by the size of the missionary force or other statistics how close we are to the end.

We have mentioned half a dozen signs of the times; others could be added. These signs were given to the disciples of Jesus to assure them that in spite of the darkness of the present age, God will fulfill his purposes; and in spite of suffering and tragedy the church must never lose sight of its mission.

The signs of the times are not like road signs which may read, "Fresno, 50 Miles." So much of today's prophetic preaching is of that nature, and often the biblical message of the blessed hope is smothered by interpretations of current events which are used to convince people that the end is near. But the increase in false cults, the rumors of global warfare, devastating earthquakes, hungry masses, or, for that matter, the great progress in evangelism, cannot conclusively give us information on how close we are to the end. The signs which Jesus mentions span the entire age of the church. They are like warning signs on the highway which remind us to slow down, and point to dangers. The signs of the times call us to repentance, remind us that our future is not here on earth, encourage us to lift up our heads for our redemption is drawing near.

C. Discerning the Times

Jesus on one occasion accused his adversaries of failing to interpret the signs of the times. "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky," said Jesus, "but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Mt. 16:3). Surrounded by evidence that God's new age had dawned, that the kingdom of God was breaking into this world in the person and work of Jesus, they were still looking for signs. It is dangerously easy to get caught up in the attempt to interpret current events in the light of prophecy and not to discern the times at all. Could the rash of books on the end-times, with one outdoing the other in sensational claims, also be a sign of the times? Can these not easily become a convenient instrument in the hand of Satan to side-track us from our true mission in the world?

Our Lord said that the last days would be like the days of Noah before the Flood. They ate and drank, married and gave in marriage (Mt. 24:37ft.). I have heard these verses expounded as referring to the gluttony, drunkenness and sexual permissiveness of the days of Noah. And since these evils plague our society as well, the end must be near. But eating, drinking and marrying are all legitimate and essential activities. The problem of Noah's contemporaries was that they did not discern the times in which they lived. They were completely immersed in earthly pursuits, not their drunkenness, but their secularism, hedonism, materialism proved fatal. If that is so, we are well advised to apply this passage to ourselves, rather than figure out by the number of divorces or the amount of liquor consumed in the United States and Canada in 1977, how close we are to the end.

However, preoccupation with the darkness of our times--war, famine, earthquakes, immorality, witchcraft, etc.--can plunge us into defeatism and a determinism which is pagan in character and far removed from what Jesus and the apostles meant when they call us to watchfulness. If war is a sign of the times, should we then stop working for peace? If "men's love will grow cold" in the last days (Mt. 24:12), shall we do nothing about spiritual renewal? I have heard it said (on the basis of Revelation 3), that the lethargy of the church is a sign of the times--as if we had entered the Laodicean period and there's little we can do about it, for it has been predicted. But that is fatalism, not faith. If famine is a sign of the last days, shall we then not give our bread to the hungry?

C.S. Lewis warned that belief in the Second Coming of Christ must never preclude "sober work for the future within the limits of ordinary morality and prudence . . . happy are those whom it finds laboring in their vocations, whether they were merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil . . . No matter; you were at your post when the inspection came" (Quoted by Clouse, in *Dreams, Visions and Oracles*, edited by Armerding and Gasque, p.37).

Conclusion

Between the inauguration of the last days with the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit the church lives "between the times." This interim has been expanded into a period of nearly 2000 years, and while many are certain that we will not reach the year 2000 before our Lord returns, we have no authority to make such predictions. What, then should be the believer's attitude during this interim, these last day?

We must be realistic and recognizes that we live in a tension between the "already" and the "not yet." This means there will conflict between us and our sinful society. We will experience conflict even in our own lives. Although we have tasted of the powers of the age to come, we are still beset with evil powers. The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit will continue until Christ calls us home. However, we have the assurance that if we walk by the Spirit we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16,17). Whereas on the one hand God has made his mysteries known to us (I Cor. 2:6ff.; Eph. 1:8; 3:4), and we are called to be good stewards of these mysteries (I Cor. 4:1), our understanding of God's purposes is still rather restricted. Our prophesying is so limited because our knowledge is partial. "But when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (I Cor. 13:10).

Because of the tension of the already and the not yet, we must also remain modest in our claims about our spiritual progress and attainments. We experience salvation here on earth only as foretaste; we are "being saved" (I Cor. 1:18); we "are kept by the power of God through faith for the salvation to be revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:5). We cannot attain to perfection in this age, but we pursue holiness. Our Christian life is marked by many "lows," even though God in his mercy gives us an occasional "high." We are confident, however, that he who has begun the good work in us will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

Included in this tension between the already and the not yet is also our bodily existence. So often our spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We grow tired and weary, and we become ill and some day,

should the Lord tarry, we will die. And while the powers of the age to come break through to us at times in miraculous healings, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that the fulness of heavenly bliss is available to us in the here and now. Not only does creation groan in travail, "but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22,23).

Our Brotherhood should refrain from getting engrossed in speculations about those aspects of eschatology about which God has not found it necessary to give us light. He has given us sufficient light about the future so that we can live and serve and suffer with joy and confidence during this time of waiting, until the day dawns and all shadows flee away.

(A paper given at the Eschatology Conference convened by the Board of Reference and Counsel of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren, in Fresno, California, 1978.)

What Does it Mean to Be Biblical?

I had a professor at Wheaton College who had been brought up in the Church of God. After college he went to Princeton Seminary, where the professor in one of his classes was curious to know about the denominational backgrounds of his students. When my professor (a member of the class) answered, that he belonged to the Church of God, his instructor, who was not familiar with this denomination, asked, what the Church of God stood for. Confidently, but a bit naively, he answered, that the Church of God was a denomination that sought to order its life according to the Bible. And to his great bewilderment the Princeton professor responded: "Well, they all do that!" This comment, said my Wheaton professor, had badly shaken his denominational foundations.

If we should ask members of the Mennonite Brethren Church a similar question, the answer would probably be similar. Although we all recognize that our denomination has many weakness, it is generally held that we try to shape the life of our churches according to the teachings of the Bible. However, if one asks what it means to be biblical, we discover considerable diversity and confusion.

This paper will attempt to identify some of the problems Christians encounter in their search for true biblicism. Hopefully we can also give some helpful suggestions here and there in dealing with these problems. Above all our study is designed to stimulate our thinking and deepen our faith "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14), but that "we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Let us begin by saying that for Mennonite Brethren to be biblical means, first of all, that the Bible alone is the final authority in all questions of faith and conduct.

I. The Confession That The Bible Is Our Supreme Authority

Implied in the confession that the Bible is our supreme authority is that Christian experience with its unlimited variety, is not our final authority. Human reason also must be rejected as our final authority, although for those who have come to know Christ, their faith is entirely reasonable. Neither can conscience be our final guide, for conscience simply functions in keeping with accepted norms. It would not be wrong to say that the Holy Spirit is our ultimate authority, if one remembers that the Holy Spirit always functions in harmony with the Word of God. And who would question the affirmation that Jesus Christ is our supreme authority? However, without the witness of the apostles recorded in the Scriptures we would not know him. And so we come back to our original affirmation, that the Bible must be our final court of appeal in all matters of faith and conduct.

What makes the Bible normative for us is that "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21), and that all Scripture is *theopneustos* -- God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16). In the words of James Packer, "The significance of biblical inspiration lies in the fact that the inspired material stands for all time as the definitive expression of God's mind and will, His knowledge of reality, and His thoughts, wishes and intentions regarding it . . . Whatever Scripture is found to teach must be received as divine instruction. This is what is primarily meant by calling it the Word of God" ("Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority," *Themelios*, Aug. 1975, p. 4).

Of late there have been renewed efforts to define for the evangelical world what inspiration means, and certainly we want to say as much as the Bible itself says about its inspiration. But when we go beyond Scripture and make our definitions the test of orthodoxy, we invite problems. In a recent issue of *Christianity*

Today (Jan. 19, 1979, p.8), Bruce Marshall writes: "I'm sure glad I am a Christian in 1979 and not in 2079. Right now I only have to believe in an inerrant, infallible, authoritative, trustworthy, verbal, and plenary inspired holy Bible. In another hundred years, how many more words will we have to add to ensure our orthodoxy?" (Let me insert here, that I have no trouble with these words, but let us not deceive ourselves into thinking, that as our definitions grow longer and longer, we are becoming more and more obedient to the Word of God.)

A question which naturally arises out of this affirmation is: which books belong to the Bible? The question of canonicity is alive once again, due in part to Protestant-Catholic dialogue. Whereas Protestant Bibles in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as a rule included the Old Testament Apocrypha, eventually they dropped out, only to reappear again in some Protestant editions in the twentieth century. But however instructive and informative the Old Testament Apocrypha may be, we confess that only the 39 books (using the modern numbering) of the Hebrew Bible, and the 27 of the Greek New Testament, constitute the Word of God for us.

Some of the apostolic writings have, of course, been lost to us, and while Evangelicals may not agree on whether such lost books were inspired or not, they are agreed that the books which have been preserved are the Word of God for us.

Unfortunately, because of our sinfulness, the verbal confession that the Bible is our supreme authority as the inspired Word of God does not yet mean that we are faithful in living by this Word. It does us very little good to have the truth, if the truth does not have us; if we do not do the truth. John Mackay writes: "it is paradoxical but true that people can become so enthralled to 'pure ideas', to 'right opinions', that, in order to defend their position and to promote the cause of 'orthodoxy' as they understand it, they violate God's moral order and fall prey to the demonic" (*Christian Reality and Experience*, p. 48).

To be biblical, then, means, first of all, to confess both in word and deed that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training

in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). From this it follows, secondly, that to be biblical means to be concerned about an accurate text of Scripture.

II. The Concern For an Accurate Text of Scripture

A. A Trustworthy "Original" Text

We do not have any of the Hebrew and Greek autographs. That should not surprise us, since the writing materials used by biblical writers were no more durable than those of other ancient literature which has perished because of wear and tear. Quite in contrast to classical literature, however, the New Testament text is available in thousands of copies of the Greek text and of the ancient versions. (Of the 142 books of the *Roman History* by Livy [59 BC-AD 17] only 35 survive, and these in only 20 manuscripts. Of the 14 books of the *Histories* of Tacitus [c. AD 100] only four and a half survive; of the 16 books of his *Annals*, 10 survive in full and 2 in part. The text of these extant portions of his 2 great historical works depends entirely on 2 manuscripts, one from the 9th and the other from the 11th century.)

Not only in number, then, but also in age, classical literature is poorly supported in contrast to New Testament manuscript material, where the gap between the apostolic autographs and early copies is almost closed (e.g., P52, the John Rylands Fragment of John's Gospel, was written perhaps 50 years after the original, assuming that John's Gospel was written toward the end of the first century).

The first printed Greek New Testaments (beginning with that of Erasmus in 1516) were based on a few medieval manuscripts and the early translations into Dutch, German, English and other languages were made on the basis of this text, known from the Elzevir edition as the *Textus Receptus*, since other texts were largely unknown until the nineteenth century. With the coming to light of more ancient manuscripts and the development of the science of textual criticism, the textual base of the New Testament had to be revised considerably. The discovery of biblical papyri

(such as the Chester Beatty and the Bodmer) in the twentieth century--manuscripts which are generally older than parchment manuscripts--again called for an updating of the New Testament text.

Whereas there may be as many variants as there are verses in the New Testament, and while the debate on some of the variant readings will probably never end, we can be grateful that God in his providence has preserved for us a text which reflects, substantially at least, what the original writers wrote.

In answer to those who say that variant readings are of no significance, one needs to give only a few illustrations to show that the opposite is in fact true. To begin with Matthew, we ask: Is the doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer genuine? It is not found in the early manuscripts (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Beza), and the early commentaries on the Lord's Prayer (Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian) do not mention it. It was probably added for liturgical purposes, since the prayer otherwise ends on a negative petition. There is, of course, nothing wrong with praying the doxology, since a doxology similar to it is found in I Chronicles 29:11-13.

When Goodspeed's New Testament omitted the doxology, there was a great outcry, with one critic suggesting, that although the prayer was not all that long, busy Chicagoans, if they ever thought of praying, hardly had time to pray the prayer to the end. Today even the NIV translators (all of them staunchly evangelical) dared to leave off the doxology, as did the Good News Bible and the New English Bible.

Or, take the longer end of Mark. There are at least four different endings in Mark's Gospel, with the best manuscripts and versions ending at 16:8. Either Mark wanted to end there, or he did not finish, or the last leaf was lost before it was transcribed. However one explains this complex situation it is probably best (as Cole in his Commentary on Mark suggests), that we do not base any doctrine on the longer ending. Those who put God to the test by handling snakes and drinking poison (Mark 16:18) might take note!

All of us are loath to give up Luke 23:34, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," but the manuscript evidence for its absence in Luke is impressive. The suggestion that early scribes excised it, because they thought the prayer had not been answered, since Jerusalem was destroyed after all, hardly settles the matter. Stephen, a bit later, apparently imitated our Lord in praying for his murderers in the moment of death. It may then well be a genuine saying of Jesus, but not originally in Luke's Gospel.

And that suggests a similar situation in the Fourth Gospel, where we have the story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11). The evidence for non-Johannine origin of this pericope is overwhelming. Without going into the intricacies of the matter, it may be a genuine piece of oral tradition which was incorporated by scribes at different places in the Gospels. Some manuscripts have it after John 7:52, others after 7:36, or at the end, after 21:25, or even after Luke 21:38. Many manuscripts mark it with asterisk to indicate that the scribe who copied it felt it was out of place.

Or, take another example! When the RSV translators omitted Acts 8:37 from the text they were accused of using a corrupt text, but today, even the NASV and the NIV do not have it and no one complains. When the RSV omitted the word "blood" in Colossians 1:4 (because a scribe evidently had carried that over from Ephesians 1:7), the revisors were maligned as modernists who did not believe in the blood, but today, versions coming from the most conservative circles (NASV and NIV, for example), do not have the word "blood" in Colossians 1:14 either. These few examples will suffice.

To be biblical, then, means that we search for the most accurate readings of the Greek text (I have omitted illustrations from the Old Testament text since it is generally more uniform than the New). Since, however, most teachers of the Scriptures in our churches use an English version, to be biblical means also, to use versions that are reasonably reliable.

B. Reasonably Dependable Versions

Versions are dependable only in so far as they represent

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accurately what the writer of the Hebrew and Greek text intended to say. No two versions are alike, and that for various reasons: They differ because at times they follow different Hebrew and Greek readings, or because some are fresh translations and others are revisions of existing versions. Also, they differ because of the kind of English the translator(s) uses, whether colloquial or literary, American or British (or “international”--which, of course, no one really speaks).

Moreover, each version is done according to a pre-determined set of translation principles. For example, one has to decide in advance whether the sacred tetragrammaton for God in Hebrew is to be translated Yahweh (Jerusalem Bible), the Eternal (Moffatt), Lord (KJV and RSV) or by the medieval Jehovah (ERV and ASV).

More importantly, the translator(s) has to decide whether he will follow the original text more or less slavishly (next to impossible in the Hebrew Old Testament and often quite nonsensical in the Greek New Testament), or whether one will look for “dynamic equivalents” (like the Good News Bible) or whether one will expand the text into a loose paraphrase (like the Living Bible).

All translation is, of course, to some degree interpretation. In fact the Greek word for “translation” (*hermeneia*) means also “interpretation.” However, the degree to which a translator seeks to explicate the text varies from version to version. What is often not understood is that Hebrew and Greek texts may be legitimately translated in different ways. For example, how one interprets adverbial participles determines one’s rendering of the Greek text. One illustration will suffice. I grew up with Paul’s wonderful promise that “in due time we shall reap without ceasing” (Gal. 6:9), since that’s what Luther’s New Testament had (“ernten ohne aufhoeren”). Then, when I became sufficiently anglicized to read the English Bible, that promise turned out to be a warning, “we shall reap, if we do not cease” (“if we faint not” in the KJV). Why the discrepancy? The English versions by and large interpret the participle *ekluomenoi*, as conditional, and that’s perfectly legitimate; Luther did not.

Moreover, the question, What is the best English version? has to be broadened to include the questions: For whom and for what purpose? The Living Bible is a good children's Bible (which was its original design), but hardly a study Bible. The Good News Bible is addressed to "modern" man who does not know Bible English and so is excellent for outreach to non-church people. The RSV, by contrast, stands in the Tyndale-King James Version tradition and attempts to preserve Bible English (except for archaisms). Phillips began as an experiment with British youth during World War II and is rather racy in its idioms. NASV may be accurate but its English is stilted. NIV has tried to be both accurate and also to use the kind of English that eases memorization and that lends itself to public worship.

Perhaps one final note! Any version done by one individual translator (such as Living Bible, Phillips, and others) is always less dependable than those versions hammered out in committees. Luther in his day questioned the dependability of the Latin Vulgate on the grounds that Jerome had done this famous translation single-handedly. Did not Jesus say, asked Luther, that where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them?

The desire to be biblical, then, must include the concern for an accurate text. Assuming that we have such a text (and those who work from translations should always work with several) it would be pleasant to think, that now we will agree on what the Bible says. But really, now the problems begin. For to be biblical demands that we grapple with the meaning of the text, for if our life in this world and the next depends on what the Bible says, then we must be greatly concerned to hear the message correctly. Having then touched on the problem of authority, canon, text and versions, we turn now to the area of hermeneutics.

III. The Search For Sound Hermeneutical Principles

At the outset it should be stated that there is a basic perspecuity in the Scriptures, and the reader with an obedient heart under the guidance of the Spirit and the counsel of the Christian

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community will not fail to find the way of salvation as well as light for the Christian way.

“There is enough light in the Bible,” said the French Pascal, “to enlighten the elect, but there’s enough obscurity to keep them humble.” All one needs to do is to look at the doctrinal controversies that have raged in the history of the church, and the debates going on today within the Evangelical community (even within our own denomination) to be convinced that there must be obscurities in the Bible. Pascal’s hope that this might keep the saints humble has unfortunately not generally been realized.

Take only the doctrine of non-resistance which, as we see it, is so clearly taught in the Scriptures. How is it that the majority of Christian churches have not accepted that teaching of Jesus? Granted that many have clearly seen that the New Testament teaches non-resistance, but have rejected it on pragmatic grounds. There are, on the other hand, millions of Christians who use other Scripture texts than we do in arriving at a position which allows them to take up arms in certain situations. All the books written on the science of biblical hermeneutics have not yet convinced the majority of believers that participation in the military is wrong. And so we must keep on searching for sound principles of interpretation. Let me suggest two or three.

A. The Literal Interpretation of the Bible

By that we mean, that we want to discover what the original writer intended to convey. But that meaning precisely is not always easy to divine. I have heard it said, where differences of interpretation were debated, “The Bible means what it says, and says what it means.” No doubt about that! But you and I do not always know what it means (and sometimes not even what it says). And the matter becomes very acute when we equate our own understanding of a text with the Word of God itself. Not only does it make us intolerant and close our minds to new light, but it tempts us to stamp those who disagree with us as heretics.

P.T. Forsyth, a British theologian, made this observation: "The literalist spells out the words of Scripture just as anyone who can read a score can sound the notes of the music. But the musician who would let the music of the great composer be heard must penetrate through the notes to the mind and spirit that first set them down as witness to the music he is hearing" (Quoted by James Smart, *The Cultural Subversion of the Biblical Faith* p. 54).

And Thistleton points out that simply to repeat the words of the New Testament may mean to say something else than what they said originally. "A literalistic repetition of the text cannot guarantee that it will 'speak' to the modern hearer. He may understand all of its individual words, and yet fail to understand what is being said in translation from one language to another, literalism can be the enemy of faithful communication" ("The New Hermeneutic," in *New Testament Interpretation*, edited by I. Howard Marshall, p. 309).

Literal interpretation raises the whole question of figurative or symbolical language. A non-Christian professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago used to take delight in asking a freshman class, "Who believes the Bible literally?" And when some timid souls raised their hands he would quote Jesus' word about Herod Antipas, "God tell that fox . . .," and think that he had thereby demolished the faith of the naive with one bold stroke, for Herod obviously was not a fox. In fact he had only betrayed his own naivete, for every schoolboy knows that that is a metaphor (even if he has never heard the word "metaphor"). Herod was a sly and evil operator, and not a furry four-legged animal.

To take the Bible literally means to discover what the truth was that the original writer intended to convey by metaphor, simile, hyperbole, symbol, and parable. And that is not always easy. All I would need to do is to ask: What does the parable of the seed growing secretly mean? (Mark 4), and I am certain I would get different answers. And this whole problem gets particularly complicated when you have to interpret Gospel material which is historical but shot through with theological motifs, especially when

the same saying of Jesus or the same event is reported in three different ways in the Synoptics.

The question of what it means to read the Bible literally often comes up in connection with Old Testament prophecies, and so I would maintain that a sound principle of interpretation is that the Old Testament has to be interpreted in the light of the New (as our Anabaptist forebears insisted), and not vice versa.

B. The Old Testament Interpreted in the Light of the New

The Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New not only because the New Testament affirms that in Jesus Christ God's revelation received its capstone, but also because the New Testament writers in their handling of the Old Testament underscore and illustrate this principle (and they took their cues from Jesus himself).

The New Testament writers, who were steeped in Old Testament thought, saw a continuity in God's plan of salvation and so recast many of the Old Testament promises given to Israel and applied them to the new people of God. It was this sense of continuity that prevented the church from lopping off the Old Testament from the Bible once the New Testament books were collected (although Marcion did just that in the 2nd century).

To charge those who see the Old Testament fulfilled in the New with spiritualizing the Old Testament, and those who do not see the Old Testament as fulfilled in the New, as taking it literally, does not hold. No interpreter consistently spiritualizes or literalizes.

Without going into the question further, suffice it to say that the relationship of the Old Testament to the New is probably still one of the most crucial areas of hermeneutical debate. This debate divided the Reformation movements. Anabaptists, for example, broke out of the church-state syndrome by insisting that Christ had established a new people of God, determined not by race or nationality. By contrast, the mainline Reformers saw in the Old Testament convenient models to allow them to perpetuate the Constantinian concept of the state-church, with paedobaptism

perpetuating circumcision as the sign of membership in the covenant.

The debate on the relationship of the two testaments is often most acute in the area of ethics. We have no difficulty with the moral teachings of the Old Testament which are reiterated and even deepened in the New. The matter is quite different when we face questions such as capital punishment. Two of our brothers were recently asked by our Board of Reference and Counsel of the General Conference to write papers on that question. One based his arguments on the Old Testament and came out in favor of capital punishment, the other based his views on the New Testament and came out against it.

One hears preachers applying the Old Testament law of retribution to believers today--leading those who have prospered materially to congratulate themselves on their piety, and the poor and the sick to cry to God, wondering what sins they have committed to deserve his punishment. For some who have been successful the answer is simple enough: they have prospered because they brought the whole tithe into God's storehouse (and I am not against tithing; I practice it myself). But not even all the Old Testament saints understood the law of retribution quite like that, and that's certainly not the message of Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:1-3, not to mention passages which postpone retribution from the present to the final day of judgment.

Another point of dispute in the question of the relationship of Old Testament to the New is the meaning of fulfillment. What did Jesus mean when he said he had come to fulfill? Or, to mention a fulfillment passage from Matthew's Gospel, Matthew says that Jesus' parents settled in Nazareth so "that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (2:23). But no Old Testament prophet says that; in fact Nazareth is nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament. What then does Matthew mean with fulfillment? (Needless to say, this is a minor point in the much broader concern of how the Old Testament was fulfilled in the New.)

I have mentioned only two hermeneutical principles which, if understood properly to some degree, should help us in discovering what is biblical. But even if we should agree that a given text in the Bible has a certain meaning, we may disagree considerably as to whether that meaning had temporal significance or whether it is binding universally. This calls for discernment between what is temporal and what is permanent, between the cultural dress in which the original message appeared and the shape it takes today.

IV. Discernment Between The Ephemeral And The Permanent

Since God's Word abides forever, some may object to this kind of distinction altogether. The fact is that all Christians make this distinction whether they are conscious of it or not. James Smart makes the observation that "the road from the ancient text to the present meaning has on it many pitfalls that can obstruct, distort and falsify the words of the original witnesses. There is no simple easy route either back into the ancient situations, where the words were first spoken or written, or forward from there into our own situations in the world of today, where they must be translated that they have their own original enlightening and transforming power" (*The Cultural Subversion of the Biblical Faith*, p.126)

Someone has compared the task of the interpreter to a craftsman who measures a piece of wood with a ruler given in metric measure trying to fit a shelf given in feet and inches without knowing the conversion factor between the two scales. We have already mentioned how the New Testament transmutes some of the Old Testament passages and applies them to the new situation. Even within the New Testament there is a kind of "conversion" from one set of terms to another. For example, Jesus speaks about the *basileia* (kingdom) and Paul about the *ekklesia* (church). Even though they may not be equivalents, they certainly overlap. If such shifts take place within the New Testament itself, how shall we transfer the message of a first century book into the twentieth century?

A. Ways In Which the Leap Is Made

Let me mention several ways in which the transference from the first to the twentieth century is made without passing judgment on the merits of any of them. (a) One way is to universalize. For example, in Luke 12:13,14 it is reported that Jesus refused the request to divide someone's inheritance. On the basis of that it has been argued that the church should never meddle in politics. But does the passage settle that question?

What would have happened if all believers had universalized Jesus' command to the rich young ruler to sell everything, give it to the poor and to follow Christ? Romans 13 has often been read in isolation of the rest of the New Testament and universalized, leading Christians to submit to the demands of the state regardless of what the state demanded. What would have happened during Hitler's regime if the churches had read not only Romans 13 but also Revelation 13, where the state has become beastly and believers refuse to respond to its blandishments? However, to isolate Revelation 13 and to universalize it would also be wrong, of course.

(b) Another approach is to take a story from the Bible and identify with the character that most appeals to us. There is a hidden danger in this approach. Take the whole Mary/Martha complex. Homemakers easily identify with Martha who took care of the dishes, and those who prefer books to dishes take Mary as the biblical model for Christian womanhood.

(c) Substitution is another method of applying the Scriptures. A biblical teaching or event is transmuted into some modern equivalent. The early apostles cast out demons. How do we exorcise demons in the twentieth century? Some, of course, hold that we should drive out demons in our day just as Jesus did in his. Others, however, apply this practice differently: they cast out the demon of strong drink. Whether that is a legitimate application I will leave to the reader to decide.

(d) One can also spiritualize a biblical passage. Some would prefer to call this approach "application." For example, Jesus stills the storm. So he stills the storms in the believer's life, in the life of

the church, and so we can be at ease in the midst of the waves as long as Jesus is in the boat. All Bible readers will sense that there is something legitimate about this kind of approach.

(e) Parallelism occurs when we look for modern equivalents of that which is mentioned in the Bible. For example, one takes the master/slave relationship, and the apostolic instructions concerning that relationship, and carries it over to the modern employer/employee relationship. The parallel is, of course, only relatively exact. In a case like this one has to tread carefully. To give an extreme example: when chloroform was introduced to England, women refused to use it in childbirth because Jesus had refused the sop offered him when he hung on the cross, and also because Genesis 3 decreed, as it was understood, that a woman should have pain in childbirth. The situation changed when a clever professor pointed out that Eve was created after God had let a deep sleep fall upon Adam, and since an anaesthetic would put her into a deep sleep while new life was created, chloroform was finally accepted as a God-given gift.

(f) And if all fails, especially in Old Testament stories, we can allegorize. Think only of the profound spiritual truths that have been read into the Song of Solomon, since it is hard to accept the fact that the Bible should have a song of human love. Bernard of Clairvaux preached 18 years on the Song of Solomon and got only up to chapter 3:1--a singular feat for a devout monk!

There are other ways of making the leap from the first to the twentieth century, and I do not want to elaborate on the ones I have just mentioned. That the church in the first centuries recognized the need for recasting the teachings of the New Testament to make them applicable to new situations can be seen for example from the Gospel of Thomas, where the story of Luke 14:16ff., in which a man invites guests to a banquet and they make excuses. Logion 64 goes like this:

Jesus said: A certain man had invited guests. When he had prepared a feast, he sent his servant to summon those guests. He went to the first and said to him: My master

calls you. He replied: I have money to receive from merchants; they are coming to me tonight and I must go and give them orders. I beg to be excused from the feast . . . He went to another and said to him: My master calls you. He said to him: I have bought a farm and I have not yet gone to collect the rent of it; I beg to be excused from the feast."

In the end Jesus says: "Tradesmen and merchants shall not enter my Father's places." Here we see how a parable of Jesus was taken from its agricultural setting and urbanized. (I have quoted it only partially.)

Eduard Schweizer writes: "Back to Scripture means for every church to ask time and again in the light of the New Testament, what the form and the mission for the church has to be in this time in which she is living. It could be that the best and most obedient decision of a Luther or a Wesley has become the disobedience in his church, like the manna which grew rotten when kept for the following day" (*God's Inescapable Nearness*, p.12).

B. Problems We Face In Making the Leap

First, there is the semantic problem. Semantics has to do with meaning, signification, nuances of words. The French writer Renan once said: "*La verité consiste dans les nuances*" (the truth lies in the nuances). Since the Bible is literature, we have to understand and interpret its words.

Recently I read of a man who read the Bible and then ran to his wife shouting that God had healed his heart. And he meant that quite literally, for he had some kind of heart problem. "How do you know, David?" asked his wife. "The Lord says so right here in the Psalm. 'My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed'." Now whether the Lord had in fact healed his heart I do not know, but I know that the Psalmist did not have physical healing in mind.

Or, take the delightful promise of Jesus as it occurs in the Authorized Version: "In my Father's house are many mansions"

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(John 14:2). An English reader cannot help but think of some massive, colonial home. But this seventeenth century translation was influenced by the Latin *mansio*, which took on a special meaning in the Medieval Age where “mansions” were separate apartments representing heaven, earth and hell. The Greek *mone* (John 14:2) means simply a dwelling place and the RSV probably does it best by translating it as “rooms.”

The very fact that we “preach” on biblical texts assumes that the text needs to be retranslated into our situation; but so often preaching today sounds like a foreign language. And it’s not colloquial jargon we need, but the retranslation of the old message into our current situation.

The same words can mean different things to different people, and that’s another dimension of semantics. Robert Mounce illustrates this in the following way: What does the expression “at last” mean? Think of several different settings. Joe has been trying to think of a five-letter word to finish his crossword puzzle. Then he it comes to him and he exclaims: “At last.” How about the girl who has been waiting for several years for a young man to propose marriage. When he finally poses the question, she murmurs (to herself of course), “At last.” Or, think of the sailor caught in the doldrums who, after many days, watches the breeze begin to stir, and shouts, “At last.” What does “at last” mean? It does not really mean very much until it is put into a specific context (“Scriptural Meanings Cannot be Inclusive,” *Eternity*, Nov. 1978, p. 63f.).

The semantic problem is part of the time-boundedness of the Bible. In the words of Berkower, “This time-boundedness is already undeniably brought to light through the language of Scripture as it reflects localities and situations of a special period (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek). It also appears through circumstances and related ideas and conceptions determined by that period . . . We see that the Word of God was spoken in numerous situations, each having its own color and problems . . .” *Holy Scripture* p. 185).

Another problem in making the leap from the first to the twentieth century is that of cultural differences. Jan Ridderbos points out that “Scripture bears the marks of the period and of the

milieu in which it was written and it shares in part these marks with the culture of the entire Orient, a culture which in many ways was interrelated to that of Israel. This is true for writing, language, style, literary genre, ideas, conceptions, world view (Quoted in *Holy Scripture* by Berkower, p. 182).

Let us take the practice of women wearing a head-covering when they go to church on the grounds of I Corinthians 11:1-16. Did Paul really want a Near Eastern custom to be perpetuated for all times in the different cultures of this world? And since Paul wants men and women to distinguish themselves by the way they wear their hair, we have had cases in our own denomination's history where women were excommunicated for cutting their long hair short (or shorter).

There were people in the Crimea in the nineteenth century who were known as *Brotbrecher* (breadbreakers), for they wanted to imitate literally what our Lord did at meals, namely, he broke bread. The knife could be used to cut up other foods, but not bread, that had to be broken. But all they were doing was, imitating a first century custom.

When Tyndale translated the New Testament into sixteenth century English he had the woman who lost her coin light a candle and search the house (Luke 15). The King James Version followed Tyndale in this translation. Then when Goodspeed in the twentieth century said she lit a light, one critic thought it was a bad translation and suggested that if he "had gone the whole hog" he would have said "electric light." Modernizing the Bible, this critic added, was like putting pants on the apostles. The reason Tyndale introduced the candle to his translation was because England burned candles in his day. The original Greek does not have candle. This illustrates how the culture of the day can also affect the translation of the Scriptures.

Eugene Nida tells of a tribe in Africa which has no knowledge of rivers and boats from personal experience, and so instead of saying that Christ is an anchor for our souls their Bible reads, Christ is our "picketing peg" for our souls. These people raise cattle and tie them to stakes driven into the ground. One can, of course, go

too far in such cultural transpositions. If, for example, the word "lamb" is translated as "white seal" in a translation made for the Inuit of Labrador one has to raise a red flag. Sir Wilfred Grentell, medical missionary to the Labrador coast, tells of a woman in England who sent him a stuffed lamb, so that such an irreverent translation, as I have just mentioned, might not be necessary.

To be biblical, then, means that we must find twentieth century equivalents both in terms of language and culture, if the truths of the New Testament are to come across to us authentically. And this we must do not in order to avoid the demands of the New Testament, but because we take them seriously.

All this boils down to a cry of relevance. Clark Pinnock points out that "fidelity does not consist in simply repeating old formulas drafted in an earlier time." That, he says, was the approach of classical theology, "concentrating upon fidelity and continuity with the historic Christian belief system set forth in Scripture and reproduced in creed and confession, with what C. S. Lewis called mere Christianity" ("An Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 5, 1979, p. 23ff.).

At the opposite end of the pole we have liberal theology which is not unconcerned with maintaining links with the Bible and classical beliefs, but which is concerned with how belief is possible today. It is considered treasonable to make oneself to believe outmoded biblical notions. And so Bultmann has suggested that we demythologize them and reinterpret them in ways acceptable to the modern spirit. In their desire to be relevant many modern theologians have lost continuity with Scripture and Christian tradition. "Instead of Scripture being the norm, theology is governed by the nineteenth and twentieth century cultural ego" (*Ibid.* p. 27).

Or take the whole matter of possessions. The early church clearly shared its possessions with the needy. Is that the pattern for the church for all times? Certainly the Hutterites think so. But is that the only model in the New Testament? Hardly! That does not mean, however, that there is nothing in the early Jerusalem model of relevance and authority for us today, but it does not necessarily mean that we express this truth in the same way.

Consider the question of church order. What are the qualifications for ordination to the ministry? What should the leadership of the church be called? How is the local church to relate to the larger Body of Christ? How professional do we want our ministry to be? To give an example: the New Testament has a lot to say about apostles and regards them as having a vital function in the ministry of the early church. But we do not have apostles in the primary sense of that word today, and so we have to be careful not to assume that ministers today have authority similar to that of the apostles. And when we speak of bishops today, we hardly mean what the New Testament means, when it uses that word as a synonym for elder or pastor. And how were church leaders appointed in the first century? Not always in the same way. Besides, there appears to have been a multiple ministry, which makes our one-pastor leadership model look slightly out of joint. There simply is no uniform model for the ministry in our day in the New Testament. And that explains why Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Congregationalists all appeal to the New Testament for their church structures, but come up with different forms.

There are, then, numerous problems as we try to make the leap from the first to the twentieth century and so we should be modest in our claims to have understood the Scriptures correctly and to have bridged the temporal and cultural gap of many centuries appropriately.

C. The Silence of the Bible On Many Issues

Some questions we may have are not directly answered by the Bible. Bible readers do violence to the Scriptures when they make it speak to issues which did not concern the biblical writers in their day. German theologians have a saying that warns us not to expect more from the Bible than it can give: "*Die Bibel ist oft überfragt worden*" (the Bible has often been "over-questioned").

Take, for example, the matter of divorce and remarriage (and these two can hardly be separated). There is no question on the wrongness and sinfulness of divorce. Jesus and Paul make that

explicitly clear, as does the Old Testament. But what if it happens? If there is forgiveness for sins such as murder and adultery, then surely there is forgiveness for the sin of divorce. Only the sin of apostasy, or as Jesus calls it, the sin against the Holy Spirit, is unforgiveable. But, does forgiveness mean also the freedom to remarry in every case? At this point we wish we had more information. The divorce texts do not help us much here, since they condemn divorce but do not speak to the practical questions of what the church is to do when it happens. Perhaps, then, our answer will have to come from the gospel as a whole, which is good news for those who have failed and are in need of forgiveness and restoration.

Or, take the matter of eschatology. On all the basic truths of this subject the New Testament is clear: the return of our Lord, the resurrection, the judgment on the wicked, the bliss of the redeemed. But there are numerous aspects of eschatology on which we do not have sufficient information. One thinks of the intermediate state of the dead, the millennium, and other aspects of eschatology. There is probably no area of theology in which people give their imagination so much rein as in the area of eschatology. In a situation such as this we should accept the clear teachings of the Scriptures and be less vocal about those aspects on which we have been given insufficient light, and which do not determine our everyday lives directly.

When we come to the many ethical issues which the believer has to deal with from time to time, issues not addressed directly in the Bible, we must seek to understand the basic strands of biblical ethics and then seek to apply these to new situations as these emerge. And so we should not be too upset if we as a denomination took a position on a particular ethical question in the past, and now take a different position. That should not discourage us from taking a stand on moral issues with which we are constantly confronted in our sinful and changing society. The church must constantly seek the Lord's will under the guidance of the Spirit together "with all the saints." If it is left to every individual believer to make up his or her mind on moral issues as they arise constantly, we create chaos and the witness of the church in our society is weakened. Because

the Bible does not speak to many of the current ethical problems of our day, we try to find our way by bringing the fundamental ethical principles of the New Testament to bear upon these issues and try to come to a consensus on such matters. We should, however, realize that in our efforts to be biblical, we will not always get it right, and that means we must have the courage to acknowledge past failures and the willingness to revise our position.

It should be clear, I think, from the illustrations I have given, that the quest to be biblical is not always easy. Equally devout Bible readers will at times see things differently. However, we should not get the impression that the Scriptures are so complex that we cannot find our way. Mark Twain's observation that the passages of Scripture that were plain bothered him more than those which were dark needs to be taken to heart. God has given us enough light so that we can "do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly before our God" (Mic. 6:8).

(This paper was given in 1979 in Fresno, California, as one of the public "Seminary Lecture Series" of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.)

Water Baptism and Church Membership

The practice of water baptism is older than the Christian church. Gentiles who embraced the Jewish faith and became members of the Jewish synagogue before and after the time of Christ were baptized with water and thereby initiated into the Jewish community. Gentile men were also required to take on circumcision. Such converts were called "proselytes," in contrast to the Gentile "godfearers" who were more loosely attached to the Jewish synagogue.

John the Baptist began a radical practice: he baptized Jews who repented and publicly declared their decision to begin a new way of life. By baptism these Jewish converts (and Gentiles, for that matter) were initiated into the messianic community which was prepared to receive the Greater One who was to come. Whereas in Judaism converts baptized themselves in the presence of witnesses, in the Baptist movement John did the baptizing.

Baptism with water was a rite to which Jesus himself submitted. John found it hard to understand why Jesus should be baptized, and the baptism of Jesus has always been somewhat difficult for later Bible readers to understand. Standing with sinners in the Jordan River and equipped with Spirit from above, Jesus began his ministry which would lead him into his baptism of suffering and death for fallen humankind. It was his way of identifying with sinners whom he had come to save. Not only did Jesus himself accept water baptism but he also baptized others (John 3:22), although the Evangelist explains that Jesus himself did not do the baptizing but his disciples did (John 4:1,2).

J. H. E. Hull writes, "What was more natural then, than that the church, from the moment that it was aware of its identity as the

Fellowship of the Spirit, should have taken over the practice of water-baptism, not only as a continuing token of forgiveness but as a sign of conversion to the gospel and the gateway into membership of the Christian community" (*The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 91).

Shortly before Pentecost Jesus explained to his disciples that whereas John had baptized with water, they would be baptized with the Spirit in a few days (Acts 1:5). When this baptism of the Spirit took place, on the day of Pentecost, and the church was born, it never seems to have occurred to anyone that water-baptism was now outmoded. Peter declared in his Pentecost sermon that those who repented and got baptized with water would receive the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:39). And all those who received the Word and believed in Christ were baptized and became members of the Jerusalem church. Moreover, water baptism was limited to Jews who became Christian believers, but as the gospel made its way in the Gentile world, all those who embraced the Christian faith also were baptized with water (Acts 10; I Cor. 1:13,14). We must ask then: What was the meaning of water baptism?

I. The Meaning of Water Baptism

A. Cleansing

If we ask what the theological significance of water baptism might be, we get a number of answers from the Scriptures. One is that baptism with water signifies cleansing. Water is a cleansing agent the world over. It is only natural, then, that baptism should symbolize the cleansing of a person's life from sin.

When Paul was converted before the gates of Damascus, Ananias was asked to instruct him to do the following: "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Later, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he recalled their dark pagan past, but quickly added: "But you were washed" (I Cor. 6:10,11)--most likely an allusion to their baptism. He might have

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used the verb “baptized” but evidently preferred “washed” because he wanted to stress their cleansing from sin.

Washing the body obviously does not rid a person of moral defilement, but it symbolizes the cleansing of the heart. There must have been some wrong ideas on this point, for Peter protests that baptism does not save “as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience” (I Pet. 3:21). Peter may have had purification rites in mind which provided cleansing for the body, but not for the heart. Positively, baptism is described by Peter as a request for a good conscience. The noun *eperotema* can mean “request” but also “pledge,” and so the interpreters do not agree on whether baptism represents a prayer for a good conscience or whether it’s a pledge of loyalty to God. That baptism was a pledge of loyalty may be inferred from the formula “to be baptized into Christ’s name”—to transfer something to another person’s name suggests new ownership. Baptism means we now belong to Christ. In some churches it is custom for the baptizer to ask the baptizand: “Do you promises to follow Christ faithfully all the days of your life?”

B. New Life

Romans 6 has always been a favorite baptismal text for Mennonite Brethren. In part because it lends strong support to the practice of baptism by immersion. But we are not interested at the moment in the mode of baptism, but rather in its meaning. “We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).

This passage clearly teaches that baptism signifies the beginning of the new life. In baptism the baptizand proclaims before others that what happened at Calvary, when Christ died for the sins of humankind, and on Easter morning, when he rose triumphantly from the grave, having conquered sin and death, has become his or her experience by faith. Whereas life without Christ is described as

a state of spiritual death, baptism signifies that the baptizand has risen from death to life.

Perhaps another reason Romans 6 has been so important to Mennonite Brethren baptismal practice is that this passage has ethical implications for the new convert. And since the birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860 was to a large degree a revolt against unethical practices in the Mennonite villages, we should not be surprised that Romans 6 became so central in their baptismal theology. To be buried with Christ and to rise to a new life means "to walk in newness of life." The imperative, "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies" (6:12), is based on the indicative, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (6:6) in some of the early Christian baptismal liturgies the baptizands at first wore "rough" garments (reminiscent of the clothes of skin God made for sinful human beings). These were then laid aside and trampled on to indicate that they were leaving the old life of sin behind. The white garments which those who were baptized then put on, may have given Pentecost, when baptisms often took place, the name "White Sunday."

Baptism, then, not only signifies resurrection to a new life in Christ, but is also a public commitment to walk Christ's way. What is often overlooked, however, is that baptism also signifies the receipt of the Holy Spirit.

C. The Holy Spirit

The conversion accounts in Acts show a close connection between faith, baptism and the receipt of the Spirit. Peter explained to his inquirers at Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Notice how repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit are presented here as one package. Luke does not always mention all these items in his conversion stories but, says F.F. Bruce, "if it is realized that repentance and faith, with baptism in water and reception of the

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Spirit, followed by first communion, formed one complex experience of Christian initiation, then what is true of the experience as a whole may be predicated of any element of it" (*Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p.281).

When Paul was converted Ananias laid hands on him so that he might regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit; and immediately upon that he was baptized (Acts 9:17,18). As Peter preached to Gentiles in the home of Cornelius the Holy Spirit fell upon them and Peter commanded them to get baptized (Acts 10:44-48; 15:7-9).

In Ephesus Paul ran into a group of disciples of John the Baptist who had been baptized with water but, as he discovered, had not received the Holy Spirit. Upon further instruction they received the Holy Spirit and Paul then baptized them in the name of Jesus, since water-baptism without the gift of the Spirit was not Christian baptism.

Because of this close connection between baptism and the coming of the Spirit into the life of the person who puts his faith in Christ, we should not be surprised when many churches baptize by sprinkling or pouring, to symbolize the coming of the Spirit upon the baptizands. This also explains why baptisms are often performed on Pentecost Sunday, the day on which the church recalls the outpouring of the Spirit by the risen Christ.

II. The Mode of Baptism

Nothing specifically is said in the New Testament about the mode of baptism. Evidently there was no controversy on that matter in the early church. From the word "baptize," however, and from such passages as Romans 6, as well as from other evidence, immersion appears to have been the regular mode in the early church.

The first reference in Christian literature to the mode of baptism comes from the so-called *Didache*, a teaching manual used around the beginning of the second century. In this church manual immersion is preferred, but pouring is allowed: "Baptize in the name

of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have not running water, baptize in other water . . . If you have neither, pour water thrice on the head in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (7:1-4).

The protest of the Anabaptists in the 16th century was not against sprinkling or pouring, but against infant baptism. They insisted that baptism should be upon confession of faith and for that reason they rebaptized those who had been baptized as babes. They did not, however, immerse like the English Baptists.

From the time of the Reformation up to the 19th century Mennonites practiced sprinkling or pouring. When however the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed in 1860, immersion was accepted by them as the mode of baptism, and the "brethren" had to defend themselves vigorously against the charge that they had become Baptists. Not only did Mennonite Brethren practice immersion, but they also insisted that believers who had been baptized by another mode upon confession of their faith had to be rebaptized if they wanted to become members of the MB Church.

This restriction caused much grief and it was, we believe, a step in the right direction, when the MB General Conference decided not to require rebaptism of those who were baptized as believers, but not immersed. The official policy of the MB Church now is: those who have been baptized upon confession of faith, regardless of mode, may join the MB Church without rebaptism and may transfer freely from one MB church to another (a decision reached in 1972 at the General Conference held in Reedley, California).

This, however, does not include those who were baptized as infants and later came to put their trust in Christ, even if they were confirmed. Their baptism is not recognized by the Mennonite Brethren Church because it is not considered to be "believers baptism."

The fact that different modes of baptism are recognized by the Mennonite Brethren Church, provided it is believers baptism, does not mean, however, that churches are free to practice different modes. In the interest of unity and order only immersion is

practised. It is for this reason, too, that those who are ordained to the pastoral ministry should have been baptized by immersion.

III. Membership And Baptism

The notion that a baptized believer need not become a member of a local church is foreign to the New Testament. Just as foreign is the thought that there could be believers who participated in the life of the church without first being baptized. We must recognize, of course, that the apostolic era was a kind of pioneer situation in which the gospel invaded the Jewish and Gentile world and only those who repented and believed in Christ were baptized.

The question of the baptism of young children, who grow up in Christian homes and accept Christ at a rather early age, is not raised in the New Testament. One should not cast doubts on the genuineness of child conversion, but if the child is very young, it would not be wise to proceed immediately with baptism. Children are so much a part of the church's life today that those who accept Christ at an early age need not feel like strangers, even if they have not yet been baptized and are not, therefore, members of the church.

In the New Testament period, however, conversion, the gift of the Spirit and baptism, by which believers were publicly initiated into the church, are all one package. Nowhere is it suggested that baptism in water saves, but nowhere are baptism into Christ and baptism with water torn asunder either. To be sure, Paul speaks of being baptized by one Spirit into the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13), but then goes on to describe the body of Christ as it was found in Corinth, where Jew and Greek, slave and free were members, and where believers lived in unity one with another. To be "in Christ" implies that one is also in the church--located in Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and elsewhere. An "invisible" church is not a New Testament concept, and it was only when the "visible" church became corrupt (when Christianity became the state-religion) that the distinction between the visible church and the true people of God became popular. In fact this remained a special problem in all churches which practice infant baptism, where one officially becomes a

member of the "visible" church by baptism before one has consciously confessed one's faith in Christ (something not all who were baptized as infants always do). A believers church, in principle at least, baptizes only those who have put their trust in Christ and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so the local church is the body of Christ in miniature. Paul never addressed an "invisible" church, but always wrote to saints in Christ who were members of a church at specific geographical locations.

When baptism is divorced from membership in the body of Christ (as represented in a local church) it loses its significance. In fact there have been few churches in history that have divorced baptism from church membership. (The Christian and Missionary Alliance has, but efforts are being made even in that denomination to change that.) It would be a great pity if Mennonite Brethren churches should begin to separate baptism and membership in a "covenant community"--a term so popular among our forebears. Those who advocate the separation of baptism from church membership often appeal to the lone Ethiopian who was baptized by Philip without being added to a local church. That argument is almost as weak as when one argues from the repentance of the thief on the cross that baptism should be dispensed with altogether (as, for example, Quakers, the Salvation Army, and others have done). Obviously there was no congregation on the way to Ethiopia that the traveler could have joined (tradition has it that he established one when he got home. Although such a tradition may be hard to support with historical facts, it suggests that it was assumed that those who came to faith in Christ became members of a local church by baptism).

Michael Green writes perceptively: "There are three strands which taken together make a man a Christian. There is the human side--repentance and faith. There is the divine side--reception of the Spirit, adoption into the family of God, forgiveness of sins, justification. There is the churchly side--baptism into the body of believers. And all three belong together and are necessary parts of initiation" (*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, p. 132).

It would take us too far if we were to discuss the relationship of the Lord's Supper to church membership, but it should be mentioned in passing that in most paedo-baptist traditions not even baptized children are admitted to the Lord's Table until confirmation. How strange, then, when unbaptized children in a believers church are encouraged to participate!

It is a bit daunting to write on a topic on which hundreds of tomes have been published in the long history of the church. We have barely scratched the surface of this vast subject, but before we get excited about all kinds of innovations in the matter of baptism and church membership, let us make sure that we bring the entire New Testament to bear on this subject and not simply a few selected passages. Above all, let us be true to our calling to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19).

(This paper had its origin in an attempt to address the connection between baptism and church membership upon the request of the Canadian Board of Reference and Counsel in 1972. Later it was expanded and published in the *Christian Leader* in August 26, 1980.)

The Restoration of Our Inner Life

A minister in New Hampshire tells the following story:

When I was a boy, we spent a month each summer in an old farmhouse in New Hampshire. The house was 150 years old when it first came into our family's hands and had never been modernized. As my father was the minister of a modest-sized Episcopal church, we were always short of money; and so for a long time we lived in the house quite simply, without the benefit of modern plumbing or electricity. Our water supply during these years was an old well which stood just outside the front door. The water from this well was unusually cold, pure and a joy to drink, and the well was remarkable because it never ran dry. Even in the severest summer drought, when others would be forced to resort to the lake for their drinking water, our old well faithfully yielded up its cool, clear water.

Eventually the day came when the family fortunes improved and it was decided to modernize the house. Electricity now replaced the old kerosene lamps, an electric stove took over from the ancient kerosene burner, and modern plumbing and running water were installed. This necessitated a modern well, and accordingly a deep artesian well was drilled a few hundred feet from the house. No longer needed, the old well near the front door was sealed over to be kept in reserve should the occasion arise when for some unforeseen reason the artesian well would not suffice.

So things stood for several years until one day, moved by curiosity and old loyalties, I determined to uncover the old well to inspect its condition. As I removed the cover, I fully expected to see the same dark, cool, moist depths I had known so well as a boy. But I was due for a shock, for the well was bone dry.

It took many inquiries on our part to understand what had happened. A well of this kind is fed by hundreds of tiny underground rivulets along which seeps a constant supply of water. As water is drawn from the well, more water moves into it along the rivulets, keeping these tiny apertures clear and open. But when such a well is not used and the water is not regularly drawn, the tiny rivulets close up. Our well, which had run without failing for so many years, was dry, not because there was no water, but because it had not been used.

Those of us who are involved in church ministries can readily identify with this story: our wells run dry occasionally too. It is important, therefore, that we continue to draw upon the living waters which Jesus promised those who would believe in him, in order to have a fruitful ministry.

God's servants in biblical times and throughout the history of the church experienced times of drought and depression in their lives, but they were renewed again and again by God's Spirit. Bible readers have sometimes wondered what the Psalmist meant when he spoke of the "destruction that wastes at noonday" (Ps. 91:6). Some commentators suggest that the Psalmist had depression, melancholy in mind that sometimes comes over people in mid-life, at the noon-day of life. Others have taken "noon-day" quite literally. I am told that medieval monks found that listlessness beset them particularly at mid-day, and they called this *daemonium meridianum* (the demon of mid-day).

Turnbull, in his book *A Minister's Obstacles* (p. 19), quotes Cassain who describes *accidia* (dryness) as it assails a monk:

When the poor fellow is beset by it, it makes him detest the place where he is and loathe his cell; and he has a poor and scornful opinion of his brethren, near and far, and thinks that they are neglectful and unspiritual. It makes him sluggish and inert for every task; he cannot sit still, nor give his mind to reading; he thinks despondently how little progress he has made where he is, how little good he gains or does--he, who might so well direct and help others and who, where he is, has nobody to teach and nobody to edify. He dwells much on the excellence of other and distant monasteries; he thinks, how profitable and healthy life is there; how delightful the brethren are, and how spiritually they talk. On the contrary, where he is, all seems harsh and untoward; there is no refreshment for his soul to be got from his brethren, and none for his body from the thankless land.

Fortunately we are not in the same situation as these monks were, but I think you will agree that we also go through dark tunnels from time to time. We are despondent and feel depleted. And so we begin by asking ourselves, what might be the causes of this black mood?

I. Causes of Depletion in The Ministry

A. Our Humanity

God has so constituted our bodies so that they need regular times of rest. There is nothing sinful about feeling tired and exhausted. Some people have what seems like an iron constitution and do not get weary as others do, or at least not as quickly. Some need more rest than others. Some sleep better than others. All of us, however, need to come to terms with our own frail barque and not feel overly badly when we cannot do what some others can. Of course, we also have to assume responsibility for the proper care of our bodies.

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We all know how our bodily condition can affect our moods. The great Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, on one occasion spoke of the need of “oxygen and grace”:

Disembodied spirits might have been sent to proclaim the word, but they could not have entered the feelings of those who, being in this body, do groan, being burdened. Angels might have ordained evangelists, but their celestial attributes would have disqualified them from having compassion on the ignorant; men of marble might have been fashioned, but their impassive natures would have been a sarcasm upon our feebleness, and a mockery of our wants. Men, and men subject to human passions, the all-wise God has chosen to be his vessels of grace; hence these tears, hence these perplexities and castings down (*Encounter with Spurgeon*, p. 214.).

Paul writes, “Even though our outer man is wasting away, our inner man is renewed day by day.” And so, while our physical state has much to do with our moods, we can be renewed in our spirits even when our bodies are weak.

B. Our Failures

Often we cannot do much about our physical limitations which sometimes cause us to feel weak and inadequate. When we come to the matter of our personal failures, however, we cannot get off the hook so easily. Perhaps more often than not, when accidia, depression, listlessness, creeps up on us, it is because of failures, real or imagined.

In our striving for holiness we often underestimate the power of the flesh. We do not love as we ought; we fall into temptations and feel ashamed; our prayer life is not what we wish it might be; our life is beset with so many imperfections.

Some of the sadness that springs from our failures may be due to a wrong understanding of sanctification. Complete perfection is

not attainable in the present age, although in some Holiness movements it is taught that by some profound spiritual experience a believer can be lifted up from the slough of despond and live constantly on cloud nine. But the New Testament is clear on one matter: that we cannot enjoy fully in this life what awaits us in the age to come. We have tasted of the powers of the age to come, but as long as we are in this body we groan, as Paul puts it. This does not mean that we ever grow satisfied with our imperfections, but we must learn that sanctification is possible only by the Holy Spirit, and so we must give ourselves over to God's Spirit in order to overcome the power of the flesh. Daily confession of our failures, claiming the forgiveness of our sins by the blood of Jesus, will prevent us from getting bogged down in despair over our many shortcomings.

C. Attacks of the Evil One

Jesus and the apostles make it explicitly clear that we are engaged in a cosmic struggle with principalities and powers. At the head of all these evil powers stands Satan, who shoots his fiery darts at us (Eph. 6:16).

Whereas it is too simple to blame the devil for all our failures, he goes about seeking whom he might devour. We cannot simply excuse ourselves by saying, "The devil made me do it," but we know that we face a clever and powerful foe, and he employs every possible method to lay us low. Many debacles in the work of the Kingdom, and in our lives, can hardly be explained any other way but as attacks by the Evil One.

Although it does not make for spiritual health to be overly sensitive to the realm of the demonic, our problem may be that we are not sufficiently aware of Satan's machinations. Paul encountered resistance from the devil throughout his ministry. For example, when he was frustrated in his attempts to return to the Thessalonian believers, he explains, "Satan cut in on us" (I Thess. 2:18).

D. Our Own Foolishness

Sometimes when our well runs dry we have no one to blame but ourselves. Perhaps we have taken on more assignments than we can handle. I know from my own experience how hard it is to regulate assignments, especially the unexpected ones, but we must all have the courage to refuse the opportunity to do some good in order, in the end, to do more good.

If we plan carefully and organize our week as much as this is possible, we can reduce the tension that comes from being torn in every direction. Although the unexpected comes upon us from time to time, planning will go a long way in keeping us from becoming frazzled and worn out.

Moreover, we have to be able to make proper assessments of our gifts, our strengths, and our weakness. If, for example, we do a lot of preaching and teaching, we will need larger blocks of time for study and preparation, and will have less time for visitation. Also, we cannot sacrifice the welfare of our family in our efforts to meet the needs of the church.

Joseph Sittler writes in a book, *The Ecology of Faith*, about the “maceration” of the minister in our day (“maceration” means chopping into pieces). “To find proper balance and concentration of things that matter most is the crying need today. An ordered life, ordered days, ordered studies, issuing in ordered worship and work—this is the salvation of the pastor from the trivia of busy-ness which is not necessarily the business of his Lord” (in Turnbull, *A Minister’s Obstacles*, p. 128).

We should recognize, even when we are salaried by the church, that there is a whole lot of work that can be done (and is gladly done) by others in the church. My guess is that ministers burn out more often than not because they are torn in all directions, rather than from overwork. If one takes seriously one’s own limitations and works within those limitations to the best of one’s abilities, the church, under normal circumstances, will be quite satisfied with our performance. Of course, our work is never done, but tomorrow also belongs to God, and so we must learn to run the race with patience.

E. Temptations Arising Out of Our Calling

Whereas there are temptations that beset every believer, there are some that can create havoc with the life of a minister more readily it seems. Let me mention a few of these:

1. Fear. There are legitimate fears. Fear warns us against danger and checks our recklessness. Fear makes us more careful. This is true not only in the realm of the physical, but also in the moral realm. We are kept from evil very often, not simply because we love what is good and true, but also because we fear the tragic consequences of sin.

On the other hand, fear can also be our enemy. Ministers have many of the same fears that other people have, but a few are special to them. One is the fear of standing before a crowd of people week after week and to proclaim God's Word. William Barclay admits in his autobiography that after forty years of preaching he is still frightened to death every time he enters the pulpit. Even Paul had such fears: "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and much trembling," he writes to the Corinthians (I Cor. 2:3).

The great Spurgeon confessed that sometimes he felt like moving to an obscure village or emigrating to America and to find there a solitary nest in the backwoods. I quote him: "I was timorous and filled with a sense of my own unfitness. I dreaded the work which a gracious providence had prepared for me This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry..." (*Encounter with Spurgeon*, p. 219).

Then there is the fear of criticism that creeps up on those who minister in public. We want to do our job well, but we know, too, that there will always be those who find fault with what we are doing or not doing. Spurgeon advised his students at his preacher's college to go into the ministry with one ear deaf and one eye blind, so that they would not hear everything people said about them or see everything that was going on. He suggested that when people did throw mud at them, they should not try to clean it off, lest they make a greater mess, but rather they should wait until it dried; then it would fall off by itself. Unless we can handle a measure of

criticism, we will hardly be able to come to terms with our fears, and we will become discouraged.

2. Discouragement. From time immemorial servants of God have experienced discouragement. Think only of some of the great men of God of the Old Testament: Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah--to mention only a few. I am told that there used to be in Scotland a friendly society called "The Order of the Juniper Tree." You will recall that Elijah took shelter under a Juniper tree one day when he had given up on life after winning a victory over the priests of Baal and was pursued by wicked Jezebel.

The causes of discouragement are many, but one that seems to be quite common, comes from the feeling that what we are doing is in vain. Repeatedly Paul expresses his fear that his work would come to nought and he would have labored in vain. Nothing is quite so discouraging as the nagging question: "What's the use?" When that question drags us down, we should remember that even though, as in the parable of the sower, much good seed is lost, in the end there is an abundant harvest. As long as we faithfully expound the great truths of the Scriptures we can leave the rest to God.

Discouragement has a number of causes. Blue Monday is never far away, and so it is important that we renew our courage.

3. Loneliness. One might think that a pastor who works with people all the time should not be plagued with loneliness. And some are not. But there are those who feel isolated by virtue of their calling. The minister is called upon to comfort the sorrowing, to encourage the weak, to pour oil on troubled waters, but often he too needs the comfort of friendship.

Others can choose their friends, but a pastor is under obligation to treat all members of the church with respect. He can hardly afford to be intimate with only a few people in his congregation. He sits alone when he prepares his messages; he often goes alone to visit the sick; often he alone knows about the trials, temptations and struggles of individuals who have taken him into their confidence--things he cannot share with others.

If I may quote Spurgeon once more: "This loneliness, which if I mistake not is felt by many brethren, is a fertile source of

depression, and our ministers' fraternal meetings, and the cultivation of holy intercourse with kindred minds, will, with God's blessing, help us greatly to escape the snare" (*Encounter With Spurgeon*, p. 217).

Incidentally, Spurgeon gives a few pointers here on how to overcome feelings of loneliness. We have to find kindred minds with whom we can share questions and concerns. One of the great blessings of working in a Bible college setting is that one can dialogue with kindred minds.

There is, of course, another side to all this: a pastoral ministry can be very enriching because of the close relationships that a pastor can forge by walking alongside people, sometimes for many years of their life. Births, graduations, weddings, and funerals become occasions in which one can minister to individuals and families in ways that college teachers can not.

What then are some of the resources by which our spiritual, mental and physical life can be renewed?

II. The Renewal of Our Inner Life

I have already pointed out the close connection between our inner life and our physical well-being and that at times physical renewal also contributes to the renewal of our inner resources. However, we now want to concentrate on the spiritual disciplines that help us in the renewal of our inner life.

A. The Scriptures

Paul speaks of the "consolation" that comes from the Scriptures (Rom. 15:4). No doubt all of us have experienced the lifting power of a word that spoke to our need. It is important, then, that we drink deeply at the fountain of God's Word. Dr. Helmut Gollwitzer tells the story of how he as a young theologian was captured by the Russians at the end of the last World War and dragged off to a slave labor camp in Siberia. On the way he read Psalm 1, which speaks of the tree planted by the waters. This verse,

he says, became for him the ladder out of the abyss. It was a verse that kept him from becoming a beast. He became convinced that if only his roots were in the waters, he could bear fruit even in a Siberian slave labor camp. And, he confesses in retrospect, after his release, that the streams never ceased to flow (*Unwilling Journey*).

If the Scriptures are to be a source of renewal, we need to take note of the following:

1. Regularity of Habit. Everyone must work out a plan for him or herself in the matter of Bible reading--a plan that is suitable and manageable. Whatever the pattern, we must read and study the Scriptures regularly. Good habits make life so much easier. We all know that what is done habitually can become meaningless and can become a mere formality. On the other hand, there are few things that protect us from the disintegration of our inner life as do good habits. Eduard Schweizer, New Testament scholar in Zurich, compares good habits to the railings of a staircase: they do not hinder us from going up and down, but they do keep us from tumbling over the edge.

2. Flexibility in Schedule. Our habit of Bible reading must allow for changes and innovations. One should not measure the effectiveness of Bible reading by the amount one reads, and so there should be flexibility not only in the time, but also in the amount one reads daily. It has been my habit for some 60 years to have a "morning watch". I got into that when I was a student at Prairie Bible Institute, where a specific time in the morning was prescribed for devotions. There is nothing particularly sacred about a specific time of day, and so we should choose the time that suits best into our schedule.

3. Variety in Method. We need to use our imagination in the matter of Scripture reading. Some make it a habit of reading through the entire Bible in a year or two. Others may read a Chapter a day; or one chapter from the Old and another chapter from the New Testament. When one reads Gospels or epistles it is probably better to take smaller bites than one would if one read Kings or Chronicles. Some use a marking pencil, others make marginal notes, some read a passage together with a commentary or together with

a book of sermons or calendars of daily devotions. And we should change the version from which we are reading from time to time lest the language become too familiar.

4. Meditatively in Spirit. Simply to read the Bible is not enough. There is no magic power in the words as such. We must ponder its truths and seek to apply them to our daily life. Johann Bengel's motto is applicable today as it was in the 18th century, when this Pietist wrote in his 1734 edition of his Greek New Testament: "Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself."

When I speak of the devotional, meditative reading of Scripture, I am not minimizing the careful and more academic work in the biblical text that is necessary when we prepare sermons. But that, too, is an important source of spiritual renewal. William Barclay in his *Spiritual Autobiography* warns against malnutrition in a minister's life: "The more a man allows his mind to grow slack and lazy and flabby, the less the Holy Spirit will say to him. True preaching comes when the loving heart and the disciplined mind are laid at the disposal of the Holy Spirit."

But we should be realistic and not always expect the study of the Scriptures to be pure delight. Bunyan writes in *Grace Abounding* (p. 118): "Sometimes I have gotten so much out of my Bible that I could hardly stand it. At other times the whole Bible has been dry as a stick to me; or rather my heart has been dead and dry to it, that I could not get the least drop of refreshment out of it, though I looked everywhere for it." All of God's saints have experiences like that.

B. Prayer

Paul exhorts his readers to pray without ceasing (I Thess. 5:17). However, if we want to pray all the time we will have to pray sometimes. Claus Harms wrote, "Whoever does not pray at determined times, does not pray at undetermined ones." The devotional reading of the Scriptures and prayer can hardly be separated one from the other. We need to pray in order to hear

God's word to us, and the hearing of God's Word informs our prayers.

Again regularity is of utmost importance if we are have a meaningful life of prayer. Not the length of our prayers, and certainly not the posture, is what counts (Dr. Oswald Smith, of the famous People's Church in Toronto, usually did his private praying while walking). Also, our prayer life can be enriched at times by books of prayer, such as John Baillie's *A Diary of Private Prayer*. The Mennonite missionary anthropologist, Dr. Don Jacobs, tells of an Anglican missionary whom he learned to know in East Africa, where he served for some 25 years, who regularly used the Book of Common Prayer for his devotions. Jacobs asked him one day, why he did that. His answer was: "it helps me over the dry periods." C. S. Lewis compares our prayers, which do not always completely satisfy ourselves, with the digging of canals during dry periods, in anticipation of the days when the rains will come and the channels will be ready.

What is so comforting in our attempts to lead a meaningful life of prayer is the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. "For we do not know how (or what) to pray as we ought," but we also have the assurance that "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

Although we need to set aside specific times for private prayer, we should have a prayerful spirit all the time. And one does not always have to speak words in order to pray. O. Hallesby, in his fine book on prayer, defines prayer simply as helplessness." He writes: "Prayer therefore consists simply in telling God day by day in what ways we feel that we are helpless. We are moved to prayer every time the Spirit of God, which is the spirit of prayer, emphasizes anew to us our helplessness, and we realize how impotent we are by nature to believe, to love, to hope, to serve, to sacrifice, to suffer, to read the Bible, to pray and to struggle against our sinful desires" (*Prayer*, p. 24f.).

God's Spirit can help us establish a relationship with God so that we scarcely pass through any experience without speaking to

him about it, either in supplication, in sighing, in pouring out our woes or in thanksgiving and praise.

C. Reading

When Paul lay in prison he wrote to Timothy, asking him to bring the books and, above all, the parchments, when he came to Rome (2 Tim. 4:13) John Darby, one of the leaders of the Plymouth Brethren, was asked on one occasion, whether he held every Scripture passage to be of significance for us today. When he answered in the affirmative, he was asked, what relevance a verse like 2 Timothy 4:13 might have. "Oh," he said, "that verse kept me from selling my library."

Dr. Martin Loyd-Jones, in his book *Preaching and Preachers* (p. 118), writes, after a long life of ministry: "There is nothing more important for preaching than the reading of Church history and biographies." He said that to alert preachers to the rich source of information Church history and biography provides for sermon making. But I would like to add: these are also invaluable sources for the renewal of our own spiritual life.

I have read hundreds of biographies in my life and many of them have been a tonic for my soul. We should, however, read more widely than that, and we should be careful not to limit our reading only to lighter devotional material. When we have communion with great Christian thinkers, as we read their books, our horizons are expanded and our spirits are lifted.

John Wesley at a conference of Methodist preachers, in 1766, advised them to spend at least 5 of every 24 hours in reading useful books, and not the Bible only. For, he said, they were not above St. Paul who felt the need for books as well. He also told them, that if they did not have sufficient books he would see to it that they got them.

D. Song

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and

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hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). Paul here has corporate worship in mind, but what he says certainly has application for private devotions as well.

I have at times used the hymn book alongside my Bible reading. Sometimes the words of a song help us to express what’s in our hearts or it addresses our felt needs in a more pungent manner. And if we have opportunity to be alone during the day, we may wish to sing a hymn audibly for ourselves. That can be a great source of renewal. Corporate singing, of course, is also a source of great strength, or even just listening to the great songs of faith on tapes or some other means. One historian makes bold to say that the church has come through the vicissitudes of the centuries by singing.

E. Brokenness

No one goes through life without being hurt. We suffer adversity in our calling, we become ill, friends let us down, a child becomes wayward, we have financial setbacks. These are part of our life here on earth.

God in his grace often turns the failures and tragedies of life into means of grace. It is often when we are at the end of the rope, in despair, that God comes to us and meets our needs in a marvellous way.

There is a legend of German baron who built a castle by the Rhine. From turret to turret he strung wires, hoping that when the winds would blow, his great Aeolian harp might make some music. He waited long and patiently as winds from every direction blew against his castle, but no music. Then one night there was a hurricane, tossing the Rhine into fury; the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled and the winds shrieked.

The baron watched the frightening scene from his castle door, when suddenly, the sound of music, like angels singing in the storm. The tempest had given life to his harp. That tale touches the heart of one of life’s deep mysteries, the mystery of suffering and brokenness. It is a paradox in the Christian life, that God takes the

dark nights of the soul and by his grace turns them into bright mornings.

In the whole matter of spiritual renewal we touch upon that mysterious working together of God's sovereign grace and human responsibility. We must make use of the means of grace, but only God's Spirit can renew our spiritual life. Although we need to foster spiritual disciplines, they are all to no avail, when left to ourselves. Dr. Jowett, the great English preacher, tells of preparing a sermon on John 3:5, "Unless a person is born again by water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." In that passage the Spirit is likened to the wind. Jowett went to the seashore where he met a sailor whom he asked: "Can you explain the wind to me?" He thought for a moment and then said: "No, but I can hoist a sail." Jowett immediately caught the import of what the sailor had said. We cannot explain the mysterious work of the Spirit of God in our lives, but we must be sure to hoist a sail. If we do that, we are bound to experience something of the mysterious power of God's Spirit in our lives.

(This paper was given at a Ministers and Deacons Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1983.)

Discerning the Spirits

The apostle John exhorts his readers to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). According to 1 Corinthians 12:10, some members of the church have been given the gift of discernment in special measure. The exhortation to “test everything” (1 Thess. 5:2) is, however, directed at the entire congregation. That does not mean that believers are to view new developments in the life of the church with suspicion. Rather, it is a call to examine both the doctrines and practices of all Christian movements in the light of the Scriptures. This paper is an attempt to do that, with a focus on recent developments within the charismatic movement.

We begin with a brief overview of some of the spiritual renewal movements of the twentieth century. Following that, we list some of the strengths and weaknesses in these movements. Finally we examine several major issues that have come to the fore more recently in these renewal movements.

I. Twentieth Century Renewal Movements

The so-called charismatic movement (in the biblical sense of the word “charismatic” there is no such thing as a non-charismatic church) has its roots in Pentecostalism. Although there have been Pentecostal manifestations throughout the history of the church, Pentecostalism, as we know it in North America, had its beginnings in 1901. It began with an outburst of glossolalia in a Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, but its epicenter soon shifted to the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles.

A host of denominations, such as: Church of God (Cleveland), Church of God in Christ, Assemblies of God, the Church of the

Foursquare Gospel, and several other "Pentecostal" denominations were spawned by this dynamic movement. All classical Pentecostals have in common at least one conviction: conversion to Christ should be followed by Spirit baptism, for which speaking in tongues is the evidence.

Although mainline churches generally distanced themselves from the teachings and practices of Pentecostal churches during the first half of the twentieth century, by the 1960s Pentecostalism had spawned the so-called charismatic movement, which was pervading not only mainline Protestant, but even Catholic churches. Sometimes this movement is called Neo-Pentecostal. Although this development created controversy and tension within established churches, many of the new charismatics chose to remain within their denomination. However, a number of new denominations were also spawned by this charismatic renewal, such as the Maranatha Christian Churches, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and others. Also, a host of parachurch renewal centres, missions, publications, music, broadcasts, and the like, were the fruit of this Neo-Pentecostal revival.

While there is considerable doctrinal diversity within the charismatic movement, by and large those who identify with this spiritual revival hold to the fundamental teachings which the Christian church has adhered to throughout its history. However, in contrast to mainstream Evangelicalism there is generally an emphasis on a second work of grace, a post-conversion experience, in the charismatic movement. This is often described as a baptism with the Spirit and is understood as an experience whereby the believer is lifted to a higher spiritual plane. Often this experience is attended by speaking in tongues, although not necessarily.

Both classical Protestantism and the more recent Neo-Pentecostal movements put great emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, notably the gift of healing and revelational prophecy. However, such generalizations are made with some risk, for within the broad parameters of the charismatic movement new developments both in practice and in doctrinal understanding are constantly taking place. In the 1980s we witnessed a development that is called "the third

wave.” (This expression evidently was coined by Peter Wagner of Fuller Theological Seminary.) Pentecostalism was said to be the first wave, the charismatic movement in general the second wave, and now a “third wave” is coming over the churches. In this third wave there is an emphasis on “power evangelism,” meaning, evangelism that is accompanied by “signs, wonders and miracles.” Even more recently we have witnessed other phenomena, such as the Kansas City Prophets movement and the so called Toronto Blessing. These developments have raised serious questions in the minds of believers both within and outside the mainline charismatic movement.

II. Strengths And Weaknesses in These Movements

Paul exhorts us to test everything and to cling to that which is good (I Thess. 5:21). Interestingly, that admonition follows immediately upon his warning not to quench the Spirit and not to despise prophecy.

There are obviously aspects of the charismatic movement which Christian believers of all persuasions can heartily endorse. In fact, some of the strengths of the current renewal movements could be found in some branches of the church throughout the centuries. But let me mention a few emphases that come to mind when one thinks of the current charismatic movements. There is a strong emphasis on Spirit-empowered living. Much is made of prayer, of generous giving, of spontaneity in worship (although mainline Evangelicals have serious reservations about some of the bizarre phenomena that characterize Christian worship in some branches of the charismatic movement). Also, charismatics have demonstrated a zeal for reaching out to the lost, especially to broken lives and broken families. In general, too, there has been a greater appreciation of the gifts of the Spirit, although too often those gifts which are more striking to the eye are singled out. And who can deny that God in his infinite wisdom and power has done some striking miracles through his servants in these renewal movements? On the other hand, there have been (and still are) some serious faults

and weaknesses in the current renewal movements. (All such movements seem to go through a "sifting period," by which some of the doctrinal and ethical abuses are overcome--the early history of the Mennonite Brethren Church illustrates that also.) What is most unfortunate is, that the charismatic movement has tended to divide believers into the "haves" and "have nots," depending on whether a person has had an experience by which his or her life was lifted to a higher spiritual level (however one might describe such an experience). This tends to lead to sectarianism and even triumphalism. Those who have had the so-called baptism of the Spirit quite naturally prefer to fellowship and to worship with those who have had a similar experience. And while we should not discourage believers from having new experiences in their life of faith, the New Testament writers nowhere describe such a post-conversion experience by which God's people are lifted up to a higher plane (Acts 8 and 19 are fundamental planks in this kind of teaching, but neither of these passages teaches a second work of grace). That we are all exhorted to be filled with the Spirit is another matter (Eph. 5:18). The baptism of the Spirit, as understood in some branches of the charismatic movement, can lead to spiritual elitism. Also, the emphasis on subjective experiences tends to put undue stress on the emotional aspect of the Christian life, often leading to an unhealthy craving for spiritual "highs" (followed frequently by spiritual "lows").

Then, too, there has been an anti-intellectual bias in the charismatic movement. This is a serious fault in light of our Lord's exhortation to love the Lord our God "with all your mind" (Mt. 22:37). In a recent article in *Christianity Today* (August 10, 1998, p. 52), Dr. Plantinga reminds us that "anti-intellectualism is anti-Christian." It "is the sin of lazy people or of fearful people who content themselves with first simplicities and who resist the pain it takes to grow beyond them." The strong emphasis on heart religion is something commendable, but it should not be made at the expense of clear thinking and careful study of the Scriptures. A more serious fault is the claim that God reveals himself directly to his children,

and that words of knowledge and prophetic utterances are often not subjected to the written Word of God.

There has been a tendency, as James Packer points out in his book, *In Step with the Spirit*, towards “eudaimonism”—the notion that God’s chief concern for his children is that they should be happy, healthy and even wealthy. Suffering, sacrifice, and cross-bearing for Christ’s sake do not fit well into this picture of the Christian life.

Also, by emphasizing the supernatural aspects of God’s work in the lives of his people (an emphasis often lacking in some church traditions), the natural, which is also the Creator’s handiwork, is often undervalued. This can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on miraculous healing over against the contributions of medical science. To be open to the supernatural is, of course, something very positive and is fully endorsed by the Scriptures. But one can become so mesmerized by the miraculous that one overlooks the importance of living lives of holiness and following Jesus in the rough and tumble of daily life. People who are open to the supernatural aspects of the Christian life often have a greater awareness of demonic principalities and powers as well. That in itself is also biblical. However, the preoccupation with the demonic, with exorcism and with “spiritual warfare” generally, can have harmful effects. Too much dabbling in the realm of the demonic, the satanaic, or the occult can lead people to lose sight of the centrality of Christ in the Christian life.

In spite of such faults and weaknesses (which can be found to a greater or lesser degree in all denominations), the charismatic movement has spread all over the world and we cannot deny that God is doing an amazing work by his Spirit. How then shall we relate to this movement with all its diversity, its strengths and weaknesses?

Among mainline Evangelicals there is no agreement on how one should evaluate the many aspects of the current renewal movements. One approach, which seems a bit extreme, is that called the “cessationist view.” Those who hold to this position argue that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were not meant for the post-

apostolic church. Gifts such as prophecy, tongues and healing were confined to the first century and were important at the time when the apostles were establishing the church, and the New Testament was not yet complete. This view has strong support in both Reformed churches as well as in those circles where Dispensational hermeneutics are practised. Cessationists hold to the dynamic presence and power of the Spirit in the life of the individual believer and in the church, but they stress the unique character of the apostolic period. Also, they deny that the book of Acts teaches a post-conversion baptism of the Spirit, although even some scholars in the charismatic tradition, such as Michael Green and Gordon Fee would agree with them on that point.

Moreover, cessationists do not teach that all gifts of the Spirit have ceased or that the church is devoid of such gifts today, for certainly the church will always need the gift of teaching and pastoral care. Nor do they hold that miracles have ceased, but not that they are necessary dimensions of evangelism. But they are very wary about revelatory prophecy, for fear that such prophecies might be in conflict with the Scriptures. Prophetic gifts, cessationists argue, belong to the canonical period, as do also the sign-gifts. Other gifts continue and the list of charisms found in the New Testament, they say, are not exhaustive but represent a sampling of spiritual gifts. The strength of the cessationist position lies in its insistence that the foundational period of the church, the apostolic age, is different from that of the later church.

Other Evangelicals take a more open but cautious stance toward the charismatic movement than do cessationists. Although they agree with the cessationists in many respects, they hold that the charismata, present in the New Testament period when the church was founded, are available to believers throughout history until Christ returns, even though some of the gifts may come to the fore from time to time, depending on the needs of the church. However, they acknowledge that apostles and prophets in the primary sense of those words were given for the establishment of the church, and that only in a secondary sense do we have apostles (messengers, missionaries) and prophets today. Non-cessationists also insist that

the canonical Scriptures are the church's ultimate authority in all matters of doctrine and practice, but they would not limit the prophetic gift, miraculous deeds, signs and wonders to the first century.

Cessationists and those mainline Evangelicals who are more open to Neo-Pentecostalism have much in common, and yet both would want to distinguish themselves from the Pentecostal/charismatic movements (for our purposes we lump classical Pentecostalism, which had its roots in the revival of 1901, and the more recent charismatic movement together). Although there is infinite variety within the charismatic movement, the "third wave," as represented, for example, by missions professor C. Peter Wagner, is sufficiently distinct from the charismatic movement as to represent a point of view distinct from that of cessationists and those mainline Evangelicals who are cautious but open to the current renewal movements.

"Third wave" proponents hold that the proclamation of the gospel should ordinarily be accompanied by "signs, wonders and miracles" (their distinctives are laid out by Wayne Grudem in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (1996). In contrast to Pentecostals and charismatics generally, however, they hold that the baptism of the Spirit occurs at conversion and subsequent experiences are better called "fillings" or "empowerings." Although they acknowledge that the gift of tongues is a legitimate charisma for post-apostolic times, they do not teach that the possession of this gift is a sign that a person has had a post-conversion renewal experience.

Besides these identifiable positions (Cessationist, Pentecostal/charismatic and Third Wave) we have vast numbers of mainline Evangelicals who do not fall into any of these categories. They do not agree with Cessationists who relegate many of the charismata to the first century. On the other hand, they are convinced that the church today cannot simply duplicate the apostolic era. They believe in miracles; they do not rule out speaking in tongues (if practised according to Paul's instructions in I Cor. 14); they emphasize evangelism; they encourage the careful study of the Scriptures and faithful obedience to Christ in daily life,

rather than miraculous gifts. They represent a kind of *via media*. They cannot wholeheartedly endorse Cessationism, neither can they accept uncritically some of the Pentecostal/charismatic and Third Wave teachings. In particular they have questions related to revelation, prophecy, and the concept of the “the last days.” And so we want to address these areas briefly.

III. Special Problems Arising Out of The Current Renewal Movements

A. Revelation

In ordinary English the word “revelation” can refer to any new insight or understanding that may come to a person, either through research and study or quite unexpectedly through some observation or experience. In biblical thought, however, revelation refers to that event when God in his wisdom and grace makes himself known to human beings. The God of the Bible could have remained hidden and left us to stumble in the darkness of our sins. But in his infinite mercy he chose to reveal himself and to let us know his salvatory plans for humanity. What made it possible for humankind to receive divine revelation was the fact that we were made in the image of God.

Christian believers throughout history have firmly held that God spoke from time to time through the prophets of the Old Testament and in the fulness of time through his Son, Jesus Christ. The writings of the prophets and apostles witness to God’s preliminary revelation in the Old Testament and to his final and fuller revelation in the New Testament. What was formerly not yet clear “has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5). This does not mean, however, that we now know everything there is to know about God and his plans for humanity; there are still mysteries about God and his ways that we will not comprehend this side of eternity, “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face” (I Cor. 13:12).

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In order to make himself known, God in his sovereign grace chose human agents, such as the prophets, through whom he spoke to humankind. Although they recorded what was revealed to them in the languages of their day and in the context of their cultures, they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), inspired of God (2 Tim. 3:16), as they wrote. The books of the Bible in which prophets and apostles have recorded what God revealed to them are the authoritative guide for the people of God. The church has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). What we have in the Scriptures is often called “special” in contrast to “general” revelation, for God has not left himself without a witness in the hearts of human beings in general (Rom. 1:20; Acts 14:7).

With the witness of the apostles to God’s final revelation in Jesus Christ, the biblical canon was complete, even though it took some time for all the churches to acknowledge all the books of the New Testament as canonical. No person, since the apostolic age came to a close, has had the authority to add to the biblical canon. The church’s task is to interpret the Scriptures correctly and to live in accordance with their teachings. In this effort the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of Bible readers. Jesus promised that the coming Spirit would guide his followers into all truth (Jo. 16:12). It is through the enlightenment of the Spirit that we can grasp the message of the gospel (I Cor. 2:9-12).

These new insights which we get from time to time in the study of the Scriptures and in our reflections on God’s ways, are sometimes called “revelations.” Believers in the early church were in fact encouraged to share such “revelations” spontaneously in the meetings of the saints (I Cor. 14:26). God can bring specific things to the mind of the believer, perhaps a specific word of Scripture that meets the need of the moment or a sudden insight into the application of Scripture to a specific situation. We should, however, distinguish between what God has revealed in his Word and our understanding of the Scriptures. Our insights into God’s revelation, as found in the Bible, are always limited and sometimes even wrong, and so we should avoid making claims such as, “This

is what the Lord revealed to me.” Our understanding of revelation is closely linked with the gift of prophecy and so there is some overlap between “revelation” and “prophecy,” to which we turn next.

B. Prophecy

The word “prophecy” is used in several different ways in the Scriptures. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke God’s word to their respective audiences and these messages were then put into writing (there were also oral prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, whose messages were not recorded). These prophets were called of God and proclaimed what God had revealed to them. They could, therefore, preface their oracles with “Thus says the Lord.” Their messages became part of the Hebrew Scriptures and together with the writings of the apostles later became the foundation documents of the Christian church.

The gift of prophecy did, however, not cease with the coming of Christ. Prophecy was a gift of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). There were prophets and prophetesses in the early church (I Cor. 12:28; Acts 21:9; Eph. 4:11). There were prophets in Antioch (Acts 11:27; 13:1), Rome (Rom. 12:6), Corinth (I Cor. 11:5), Thessalonica (I Thess. 5:19,20), and other churches. Prophets in the primary sense of that word are sometimes associated with apostles (Eph. 2:20; 3:5), and participated in laying the foundation of the New Testament church. In fact the teachings of the apostles are called “words of prophecy” (Rev. 1:3). There were, however, also prophets and prophetesses in the church who conveyed messages to the people of God, designed to strengthen them in the faith. “Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (I Cor. 14:3). Although the predictive element was not altogether absent (Acts 11:28), words of prophecy helped to guide and to build up the believing community.

In contrast to the prophets who, like the apostles, received messages from God which were and remain authoritative, the words

of prophecy spoken in the churches were not necessarily authoritative and were open to discernment and criticism. When someone with the gift of prophecy spoke to the church, others were to weigh what was being said (I Cor. 14:29). Prophecies were not to be despised, but the congregation was to test everything and hold to that which was good (I Thess. 5:20,21). We have no grounds for holding that the prophetic gift was withdrawn in the post-apostolic age, and so the church must remain open to words of prophecy. Such prophetic messages, however, must never stand in contradiction to the Scriptures.

Not every believer has the gift of prophecy (I Cor. 12:29), but the church is encouraged to seek this gift (I Cor. 14:1). Prophetic words are to be spoken in languages that are understood and do not need to be interpreted as do tongues (I Cor. 14:18,19); nor are they compulsive, for the speaker is fully in control of him or herself (I Cor. 14:29-31). Through such words of prophecy believers are edified and unbelievers can be drawn closer to God (I Cor. 14:2,24).

There is an overlap between teaching/preaching and prophetic messages, but they are not equivalents. Prophets are distinguished from teachers (Acts 13:1 I Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11). Although Paul warns the Thessalonians not to despise prophecy (I Thess. 5:20), prophets were generally held in high repute in the early church. That the gift of prophecy could be abused can be seen from post-apostolic writings. In the second century Montanus claimed that he embodied the Holy Spirit and claimed to speak authoritative words from God. When he refused to have his teaching tested by Scripture, the church rejected Montanism.

As long as the prophetic utterances are given within the bounds of Scripture and build up the church by encouragement in the faith, consolation and spiritual guidance, they should not be forbidden. The church should, however, discourage attempts to predict specific events in history or in the lives of individual believers. (Predictive prophecy as manifested in the current Kansas City Prophets movement holds the potential for great harm.) No one today can claim to be a prophet like the prophets of the Old Testament or those of the New Testament who are associated with the apostles

in laying the foundation of the church. Prophets in that primary sense of the word were chosen directly by God to give authentic messages concerning God's salvatory work in history and who laid down fundamental ethical guidelines for the people of God. (Sometimes the preaching on eschatological themes is called "prophecy." Such preaching has its legitimate place, but is not in focus here.)

The new openness in many churches today for prophetic messages given spontaneously in the context of a believing community, should not be interpreted to mean that the apostolic age is being restored. The New Testament knows nothing of "end time restorationism," sometimes described as the period of the "latter rain." And so it is important for us to have a clear understanding of what the apostles mean when they speak of "endtimes."

C. Endtimes

At the turn of the century the outbreak of glossolalia in the Pentecostal movement was hailed by many as a prelude to endtime restorationism. Based on a wrong interpretation of Peter's words, taken from Joel, that God promised to pour out his Spirit "in the last days" (Acts 2:17), it is widely held in some circles today that Peter's words are being fulfilled in the charismatic movement. Some even teach that we have apostles and prophets today such as those who laid the foundation of the church, and that the phenomena of signs and wonders are a clear indication that Christ's return is imminent. Also, much is made of the words of Peter in Acts 3:19f., "whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration." But the restoration Peter has in mind is connected with the return of Christ and does not refer to a special period prior to Christ's second coming. Clearly then, there is considerable confusion concerning what the New Testament writers mean when they write about "the last days." For that reason we address that topic here.

First, it should be pointed out that when Peter spoke of the outpouring of the Spirit "in the last days," he saw the fulfilment of Joel's promise in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and not a

special “latter rain” at the end of the present age. The “afterward” of Joel 2:28 becomes “the last days” in Acts 2:17, for the coming of the Spirit marked the beginning of the last days. F. F. Bruce, in commenting on Acts 2:17, makes this observation: “The ‘last days’ began with Christ’s first advent and will end with his second advent; they are the days during which the age to come overlaps with the present age” (*Commentary on the Book of Acts in NICNT*, p. 68).

According to the apostles, the church lived in the last days already in the first century. The Epistle to the Hebrews opens with the comment that whereas God spoke in many and various ways in the past, “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (1:1,2). Believers now experience “the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5). Christ appeared once for all “at the end of the age” (i.e., the old age) (Heb. 9:26).

John in his first Epistle tells his “little children” twice that it is the last hour (I Jo. 2:18). The “last hour” is an equivalent of “last days.” “Early Christians,” writes I. Howard Marshall, “certainly regarded the whole period between the first and second advents of Jesus as constituting the last days” (*Epistles of John, NICNT*, p. 148). Peter writes, “the end of all things is at hand” (I Pet. 4:7). The last days are described as short, because in God’s sight a thousand years are like a day (2 Pet. 3:8; I Cor. 7:29; Rom. 13:11,12; Rev. 1:3). Jesus warned against speculating on how long this time of waiting for the Lord’s return would be (Mk. 13:32,33). During this interim the gospel is to be preached to all nations, and then the end will come (Mk. 13:10). The period between Christ’s first and second coming is also described as an “evil age” (Gal. 1:4), and although Christ’s followers are delivered from this evil age, they are still subject to disease, sickness and death. But they live with the assurance that these last days will come to an end when Christ returns and then they will enter the gates of glory.

We must distinguish clearly between “the last days” (that interim between Christ’s first and second coming) and “the last day.” Jesus spoke repeatedly of the last day when the dead would be raised (Jn. 6:39,44,54). The last day is the close of the age (Mt. 13:39,40,49; 28:20). It is sometimes called “the day of the Lord” (I

Thess. 5:2,3; 2 Thess. 2:2), "the day of Jesus Christ," "the great day." It is both the day of wrath (Rom. 2:25) and the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30). It is also called simply "the end" (Mk. 13:7; 1 Cor. 15:24).

The apostle John speaks of a millennial reign of Christ as coming after the resurrection of the saints (Rev. 20:1-10), but it would be hard to find support in this passage for the view that the apostolic age should be restored prior to the return of Christ. In fact, the New Testament seems to suggest that the powers of evil will eventually reach their epitome in Antichrist. "Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour" (1 Jn. 2:18). We should be grateful that God is extending these last days to give people an opportunity to hear the gospel, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). We are to be faithful in carrying out the great commission until the end of the age (Mt. 28:20), but we should not be looking for a kind of "endtime restorationism" of apostolic times.

In conclusion, it may be said that many people in the current renewal movements (Pentecostal, charismatic, Third Wave), are hesitant, just like mainline Evangelicals, to endorse some of the strange phenomena in these movements. They all stress a personal relationship with Christ, lively worship, caring outreach, encouraging fellowship, and down to earth obedience in daily life. They all have the desire that their lives should be, in the words of Paul, "in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Also, believers in all these diverse streams of Christian thought share in the blessed hope of Christ's return. There are, however, a number of areas of tension, not only within the various shades of the charismatic movement, but particularly between what we might call mainline Evangelicals and Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, and Third Wave.

Some Evangelicals have reacted to the current renewal movements in poor grace. Conversely, many of those in the charismatic movements criticize mainline Evangelical churches for stifling the Spirit, and often describe life in these churches as bleak, empty and arid, in contrast to charismatic churches with their

emphasis on the baptism of the Spirit, prophecy, healing, tongue-speaking and other gifts of the Spirit. The question concerning the nature of the continuity between the church throughout the centuries and the first century apostolic church seems to divide believers in the various renewal movements. We who stand in the Anabaptist tradition appreciate the attempts to find in the apostolic church a permanent model for the life of the believers even in the twentieth century. On the other hand, we must be wary of the kind of restorationism that is advocated in some of these movements today. We do not want to quench the Spirit; rather, we want to test everything and cling to what is good" (I Thess. 5:19,20).

(This paper was written in 1998 in response to a request from the Board of Faith and Life of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren.)

Concluding Reflections

The topics addressed in this volume do not cover the entire spectrum of theological issues which the Mennonite Brethren Church has confronted in the second half of the 20th century. But they are representative of the many questions to which the church sought answers.

Some of the topics discussed in this book have moved to the "back burner," not necessarily because the members of our church generally have come to terms with them, but because they have never seriously faced them. Other topics addressed in this volume are still very much alive. For example, on the ministry of women in the church we have accepted a *modus vivendi* but we have not yet come to a consensus as a denomination.

In the past decades our churches have become more experience centred, with the result that doctrinal discussions are no longer very high on the agenda. We are not alone in this shift to the experiential. Already in the seventies, Leon Morris of Australia complained:

In view of the relativism of so much contemporary thought, it is worth emphasising the crucial importance of truth. It has well been said that by and large men today are more interested in what helps . . . than in what they believe. This is the atmosphere in which we must live out our lives, the very air we breathe. It tends to make our generation impatient of serious discussions of what is true. It is apt to dismiss such inquiries as hair-splitting and to return with relief to the more congenial task of enjoying life (*I Believe in Revelation*, 45).

C.S. Lewis (*The Joyful Christian*, pp. 32ff.) put theology and experience into proper perspective by using a metaphor taken from swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. He pictures a man on the coast of England preparing to swim in the waters of the Atlantic--something

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he enjoys very much. He also has a map of the Atlantic in his possession. This map--just a bit of colored paper--is based on the experience of hundreds of sailors who have crossed the Atlantic. Compared to swimming in the Atlantic, studying this map is boring. But if he ever wanted to sail to America the map would be very useful. His own experience of swimming on the beach would not be helpful for such a venture. Theology is like that map; studying it may not always be very exciting, compared to experience, but it is indispensable if one wants to find one's way across the ocean.

There was a time in the sixties when the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference, at its annual conventions, alternated between business and study sessions. This provided the church with an excellent setting for addressing important doctrinal and ethical issues and arriving at a consensus. Although this arrangement in the end did not seem practical, we lost something important by dropping the study conferences. The papers on current issues presented at such conventions helped our denomination to remain more or less unified as it made its way through the last fifty years.

Our current Board of Faith and Life continues to address relevant doctrinal and ethical issues in its pamphlet series. They are serving a good purpose, but they have this disadvantage: they were not presented for discussion in a Conference setting.

Perhaps a review of some of our past study Conferences, represented by the chapters in this volume, could alert us once again to the significance of "comprehending with all the saints" what the Spirit of God is saying to the current generation. In that respect the one topic in this book that will always remain relevant is: "What does it mean to be biblical." If all of us will take that question seriously, we will certainly "find our way" as we enter a new millennium.

About the Author

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